

**UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE**

Sede di Milano

Dottorato di ricerca in Scienze della persona e della formazione

Tematica “Higher Education Internationalisation and Educational Strategies and Practices”

Ciclo XXXVIII

S.S.D. M-PED/04

**Hybrid Exchange: Exploring Transformation and  
Belonging through Virtual and In-Person *Intercâmbio*  
among Brazilian and U.S. Students**

Coordinatore:

Ch.mo Prof. Antonella Marchetti

Tesi di Dottorato di:

Grace Cleary

N. Matricola: 5213987



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**Anno Accademico 2024/2025**



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## Abstract

Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs) are international education programmes that combine virtual exchange with short-term in-person exchange, expanding access beyond international education models that rely on extended physical mobility. This dissertation explores an HEP that included 24 U.S. and 16 Brazilian undergraduate students and took place over ten weeks online and one week in person in Brazil. Using mixed methods including a three-phase survey, photo elicitation, and 23 interviews, the study examines four areas of the student experience: (1) changes in students' perceived personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth; (2) dynamics that students encountered when engaging in technologically mediated cross-cultural communication; (3) how connection and belonging were fostered via programme structure and students' own agency; (4) how students from Brazil and the U.S. experienced the programme differently. Filtered through the lenses of student experience theories and critical pedagogies, quantitative findings reveal a prominent V-shaped trajectory in perceived growth: high expectations before the virtual exchange, a dip following that phase, and gains that typically exceeded initial expectations following the in-person exchange in Brazil. Brazilian students emphasised gains in professional and linguistic skills while U.S. students described personal development and enhanced intercultural awareness. Qualitative findings show how the virtual exchange, while challenging, served as an essential scaffold for growth. It prompted reflection, linguistic empathy, and adaptability that laid the groundwork for deeper engagement in person and provided students with iterative opportunities to refine and build upon their skills over the different phases of the programme. The research contributes to scholarship on programme design, reciprocity in exchange relationships, deepening student engagement, and the role of

discomfort as a catalyst for growth, while also advancing debates about belonging, equity, and the potential of hybrid formats to challenge mobility-centric models of international education.

*Keywords: Hybrid Exchange Programmes; Virtual Exchange; Blended Mobility; Experiential Learning; Comparative International Education*

## Abstract

I Programmi di Scambio Ibridi (Hybrid Exchange Programmes, HEPs) sono programmi di educazione internazionale che combinano lo scambio virtuale con esperienze di breve durata in presenza, ampliando l'accessibilità oltre i modelli di internazionalizzazione basati esclusivamente sulla mobilità fisica prolungata. Questa tesi esplora un HEP che ha coinvolto 24 studenti universitari statunitensi e 16 studenti brasiliani e si è svolto in dodici settimane online e una settimana in presenza in Brasile. Attraverso un approccio a metodi misti, che include un questionario in tre fasi, la tecnica della "photo elicitation" e 23 interviste, lo studio esamina quattro aree dell'esperienza degli studenti: (1) i cambiamenti percepiti nella crescita personale, interculturale, linguistica, accademica e professionale; (2) le dinamiche riscontrate dagli studenti nell'interazione interculturale mediata dalla tecnologia; (3) come la connessione e il senso di appartenenza siano stati favoriti sia dalla struttura del programma sia dall'"agency" degli stessi studenti; (4) come gli studenti brasiliani e statunitensi abbiano vissuto in modo differente il programma. Analizzati attraverso le lenti delle teorie sull'esperienza degli studenti e delle pedagogie critiche, i risultati quantitativi rivelano una marcata traiettoria a forma di "V" nella percezione della crescita: alte aspettative prima dello scambio virtuale, un calo dopo quella fase e un recupero con benefici che hanno spesso superato le aspettative iniziali dopo lo scambio in presenza in Brasile. Gli studenti brasiliani hanno sottolineato progressi nelle competenze professionali e linguistiche, mentre gli studenti statunitensi hanno descritto uno sviluppo personale e una maggiore consapevolezza interculturale. I risultati qualitativi hanno mostrato come lo scambio virtuale, pur essendo impegnativo, abbia costituito un'impalcatura essenziale per la crescita. L'esperienza ha stimolato riflessione, empatia linguistica e adattabilità, ponendo le basi per un coinvolgimento più profondo in presenza e offrendo agli studenti opportunità

iterative per affinare e sviluppare le proprie competenze nelle diverse fasi del programma. La ricerca contribuisce alla letteratura su progettazione dei programmi, reciprocità nelle relazioni di scambio, approfondimento del coinvolgimento degli studenti e ruolo del disagio come catalizzatore di crescita, avanzando al contempo i dibattiti su appartenenza, equità e sul potenziale dei formati ibridi di mettere in discussione modelli di internazionalizzazione centrati esclusivamente sulla mobilità.

*Parole chiave: Programmi di scambio ibridi; Scambio virtuale; Mobilità mista; Apprendimento esperienziale; Studi comparativi sull'educazione internazionale*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study describes the global learning experiences of university students who participate in Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs). Hybrid Exchange Programmes are international education programmes that combine virtual exchange (VE) and short-term in-person exchange as part of a unified global learning experience. The HEP in this study included a cohort of U.S. and Brazilian undergraduate students who participated in a VE related to a business consulting project and then met in person for approximately one week together in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

HEPs include study abroad for some students, but I situate them within the field of Virtual Internationalisation, wherein internationalisation aims are achieved through the use of technology (Bruhn, 2017; Bruhn-Zass, 2022; Finardi & Aşık, 2024; O’Dowd, 2023a; de Wit et al., 2015). I situate it here because all participants utilise digital tools to facilitate cross-cultural collaboration whereas not all students study abroad. Virtual Internationalisation gained increased visibility during the Covid-19 pandemic when many global education practitioners utilised online engagement for the first time. Such virtual tools, while not new, had not previously been a core component of most universities’ internationalisation strategies (Commander et al., 2022; O’Dowd, 2023a). The lockdown period provided newfound visibility for these tools which enabled students to remain globally engaged amid the travel restrictions in place at the time (Doscher, 2023; Ferreira Santos, 2024; Stallivieri et al., 2022; The Stevens Initiative, 2022). During the Covid-19 pandemic, student mobility had diminished significantly in the U.S., with participation in study abroad dropping from 375,000 students in 2019–2020 to just under 15,000 in 2020–2021 (IIE Open Doors, 2022a). In Brazil, the impact of Covid-19 on outbound student mobility was more modest, with 89,286 students studying abroad in 2020, dipping only slightly

to approximately 87,000 in 2021 and 2022, before recovering to 89,458 in 2023 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.).

With disruptions to traditional mobility in many contexts, the field of education abroad saw a rapid uptick in the incorporation of VE and other forms of online global learning (The Stevens Initiative, 2021, 2022). In 2021–2022, over 32,000 U.S.-based students received credit for an online global learning experience, including internships, VE, and collaborative projects (IIE Open Doors, 2022b). This indicates that many practitioners were engaging with Virtual Internationalisation for the first time and utilising it to meet international learning objectives.

Even with travel restrictions lifted, restarting study abroad proved challenging. Responses from a global Forum on Education Abroad survey showed that only 75% of study abroad offices had reached pre-Covid levels of study abroad participation by 2023 (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2023). More recent data from a survey of Forum on Education Abroad members show that despite efforts to continue to grow study abroad participation, only 68% of North American respondents and 75% of respondents from outside North America had succeeded in increasing student numbers in 2024 (Dietrich, 2025). These figures likely reflect not only the challenge of rebuilding but also staffing shortages brought about by pandemic-related funding cuts (Dietrich, 2025), as well as the current political context, which in 2025 has been shaped by rising nationalism, anti-immigration policies, re-emerging protectionism, and global instability (Hudzik, 2025). These factors have contributed to an increasingly precarious mobility landscape, where study abroad is not only difficult to access but also vulnerable to the shifting tides of ideology, resource scarcity, and global instability.

Concerns about affordability, access, and inclusivity have long shaped the discourse around study abroad participation, but the post-pandemic period has also revealed how reliant

study abroad is on stable geopolitics, predictable immigration systems, and public health. Scholars question whether the post-pandemic era might see a shift towards more inclusive models, rather than a return to the traditional, mobility-centric approaches (Helm & Guth, 2022). Ferreira Santos' (2024) recent scoping review on Virtual Internationalisation in the post-Covid era shows that, while Virtual Internationalisation strategies have gained traction, comprehensive adoption of such practices remains limited. Traditional mobility continues to dominate internationalisation agendas, and in the wake of the pandemic, student mobility trends have defaulted to familiar patterns privileging Global North locations whose costs are out of reach for many (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021). In Latin America, where physical mobility continues to serve as the dominant internationalisation strategy (Whitsed et al., 2024), this creates a particular tension as institutions prioritise internationalisation through mobility to the Global North, even as structural inequalities limit broad access to such opportunities. In this context, approaches that combine the strengths of both virtual and shorter in-person engagement hold promise for sustaining global learning amid uncertainty. Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs), with their inclusion of both mobility and VE, offer a promising site to explore the ways in which students engage in these two forms of global education as participants in the same programme, yet this form of programming remains under-researched (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024).

### **Overview of the Study**

This study responds to concerns about developing impactful international education programming and addresses a gap in the literature on programmes that blend virtual and in-person exchange. It follows a cohort of U.S. and Brazilian undergraduate students as they participate in a Hybrid Exchange Programme which encompassed approximately 10 weeks of

VE followed by approximately 1 week together in person in Brazil. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ 1: How do students' perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme?
- RQ 2: What challenges do students encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context?
- RQ 3: How does the programme design support student belonging, and in what ways do students exercise agency in creating their own connections?
- RQ 4: How does participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes differentially benefit U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by U.S. and Brazilian students?

The 24 U.S. students who participated in this HEP all studied business at the same large state university in the American Midwest, and the 16 Brazilian students came from seven different universities across Brazil. This English-taught programme began with a VE, wherein the students worked on cross-cultural teams to solve a business problem over the course of 10 weeks, ultimately presenting the results of their consulting project to a Brazilian client. They then met in person in Brazil for approximately one week to participate in business visits and cultural activities together. The VE was team-taught by a faculty member from the U.S. and a faculty member from Brazil. The content was co-developed by both faculty and staff from Brazil and the U.S. An international education organisation in Brazil facilitated many aspects of the programme including recruiting Brazilian students and developing many of the on-site activities in Brazil. The U.S. students received elective credits for participation, but due to the complexity

of credit transfers, the course was not credit-bearing for the Brazilian students, and they earned a certificate of participation from the U.S. university instead. The programme was built on a VE partnership that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic and was proposed by an international education organisation in Brazil. Once mobility resumed, the partners decided to integrate the VE and mobility component as a unified programme, and several such programmes have run from 2023 through the present.

### **Objectives of the Research**

This exploratory case study focuses on an emerging area of higher education internationalisation by focusing on the student experience on Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs). The study traces students' evolving reflections on personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional development across three programme phases (before the VE, after the VE, after the in-person exchange). It also investigates how students engage with technologically mediated communication, explores how students build relationships, and compares the ways that students experience the HEP differently depending on their country of origin. The objectives of the study are:

1. to explore how students' perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme
2. to understand the challenges that students encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context
3. to describe how the programme design impacts student belonging and connection, and to explore the ways in which students exercise agency in creating their own connections

4. to illuminate the ways in which participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes may differentially benefit U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures.

### **Significance**

Hybrid Exchange Programmes offer an alternative model for delivering international education programming. Their novel form, which blends virtual exchange (VE) and short-term mobility, allows international educators to rethink the way that international education is designed and implemented. Rather than viewing long-term travel experiences as the standard for global learning experiences, developing new global education programming enables educators to focus on how learning opportunities can be fostered and how different modalities might increase overall accessibility to a wider range of students. These programmes open pathways for participation that are inclusive of both travelling students and the students for whom HEPs serve as a form of Internationalisation at Home (Beelen & Jones, 2015). It counters narratives that longer-duration programmes are most effective (Coker et al., 2018; Dwyer, 2004; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2009) and provides an alternative pathway for students to access deep global learning opportunities.

The multi-phase design of the programme allows for scaffolded learning and reflection, as its structure allows for student engagement across multiple phases and modalities, for both travelling students and host-country students. It offers an opportunity for students to develop, test, and refine new skills in iterative ways. Hybrid Exchange Programmes also present an opportunity to reconfigure Global South-Global North partnerships. Programmes such as this one have the potential to flip dominant South-North mobility patterns, yet attention must be paid to the use of English as lingua franca and to the possibility of reifying Global North perspectives.

Exploring HEPs also allows insight into an emerging model that can respond to shifts within the internationalisation landscape. Constraints on mobility require programmes that can be adaptable to student needs and to external pressures that limit students' ability to travel. This study explores how virtual and in-person modalities function as part of a unified global education programme.

Hybrid Exchange Programmes not only restructure mobility and partnership dynamics but also intentionally foreground the notion of “exchange,” shifting attention away from mobility alone toward the relational dimensions of internationalisation. The English word “exchange” and the Portuguese equivalent, *intercâmbio* contain different elements that are core components of this dissertation. In English, *exchange* stems from the Latin *ex-* (“out of”) with *cambium* (“change”), calling to mind movement outward and transactional practice of trading one thing for another (Oxford University Press, 2025a; Oxford University Press, 2025b). In Portuguese, however, *cambium* (“change”) is blended with *inter* (“between, among”) rather than *ex*, evoking *relationships* as a component of change. These two languages offer a sense of “movement out of” and “movement between.” This layered conceptualisation of exchange mirrors the programme itself, where the merging of two student groups and the weaving together of virtual and in-person exchange generates new meanings that neither alone could produce.

### **Dissertation Overview**

The next section of this chapter provides definitions for terms that are used throughout the dissertation. Chapter Two reviews literature related to Hybrid Exchange Programmes, including VE and mobility. Chapter Three describes the theoretical frameworks undergirding the study. Chapter Four contains the methodology, including data collection and analysis. Chapter

Five describes the findings of the research. Chapter Six includes the discussion, and Chapter Seven includes implications, recommendations, and the study's conclusion.

### Topics and Definitions

**COIL:** Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a pedagogical approach in which instructors based in different countries use technology to integrate components of their courses through collaborative activities that are formally assessed. COIL activities are typically 5-15 weeks in length (SUNY COIL Center, n.d.).

a form of Virtual Internationalisation that utilises digital tools to connect students and faculty. It typically involves connecting classrooms based in different countries (Rubin & Guth, 2022).

**Global learning:** Several interrelated terms are used to describe the characteristics that global educators seek to bring out in students through their participation in virtual exchange and study abroad programmes. These can include terms reviewed in Chapter 2, including *intercultural competence* and *global competence* among others. I use “learning” rather than “competence” since the framework of “competence” risks presenting culture as static and immutable (see for instance Lekas et al., 2020). “Competence” may suggest something that can be acquired rather than as a process that exists along a continuum. In utilising the framework of “global learning,” I seek to describe the dynamic process through which a student’s outlook may change over time. The related and often-used concept of intercultural competence is defined by Deardorff as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2004, p. 144). In this study, global learning is operationalised as an ongoing process through which students critically engage with diverse perspectives, reflect on their positionalities, and explore ethical engagement within global networks. In this framing, learning is dynamic rather than static, and growth is privileged over acquisition of competencies. In viewing global learning as dynamic and process oriented,

this study is able centre student reflections rather than focus on the attainment of fixed competencies.

**Host-country students:** These students are participants in the Hybrid Exchange Programme who reside in the country where the in-person exchange takes place. They may travel within their own country to participate, but they stay within their country of residence for the programme. In this study, the Brazilian students are the host-country students.

**Hybrid Exchange Programmes:** I define Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs) as a form of international education programming that includes virtual exchange and in-person exchange as part of a unified global learning experience. While “Blended Mobility” is the prevalent term in policy and scholarship (see for instance Carthy, 2022; Ghareb & Mohammed, 2019; Helm & O’Dowd, 2020; O’Dowd & Werner, 2024), in this dissertation I use the term “Hybrid Exchange Programme” (HEP) to reflect the specific design of my study, where some students are mobile and others are not, but all engage in meaningful exchange online and in person in Brazil. This also builds on the concept of “hybrid internationalization” proposed by Stallivieri (2022) as:

the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension in the objectives, functions and offer of postsecondary education, which takes place both in person and with the support of the digital technologies of information and communication (Stallivieri, 2022, as cited in Stallivieri et al., 2022).

In my definition of Hybrid Exchange Programmes, focusing on the “exchange” element, which takes place both virtually and in-person for students from both countries, avoids privileging the “mobility” dimension of the programme.

**Intercultural competence:** Intercultural competence is often defined using Deardorff’s (2004) findings from a Delphi study with intercultural experts. The highest-rated definition was “the

ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes." Also highly ranked was "the ability to shift one's frame of reference appropriately, the ability to achieve one's goals to some degree and behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations." Deardorff notes that these definitions focus on communicative capabilities (Deardorff, 2004, p. 197). More recent work from Deardorff and Jones (2022) cites Killick (1997, 2015), who argues that "the term *competence* is in itself flawed, in that it suggests completion of the learning process and relatively low-level skills; terms such as development, awareness, understanding, maturity, or capability would be considered more representative of the processes involved." (2022, p. 225). Deardorff and Jones continue to use intercultural competence, "for ease of reference, in part because it appears frequently in the literature and is viewed as being applicable in any intercultural situation, not just those that occur abroad" (p. 225).

**Internationalisation:** This study adopts Crăciun's (2019) definition of internationalisation, which builds on Knight (2013) de Wit et al. (2015). She defines internationalisation as "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purposes, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education, in order to achieve intended academic, sociocultural, economic, and/or political goals" (Crăciun, 2019).

**Internationalisation of the Curriculum:** I utilise Leask's (2015) definition of Internationalisation of the Curriculum, defined as "the incorporation of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a programme of study" (Leask, 2015, p. 9).

**Internationalisation at Home:** I utilise Beelen & Jones' (2015) definition of Internationalisation at Home, defined as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69).

**Photo elicitation:** Photo elicitation is a qualitative research method that utilises photographs to draw out reflections that might not otherwise come through in conventional interviews. Such prompts serve as reflexive tools that enable more nuanced insights into participants' experiences and reorient them in a particular time and place, stimulating memories and yielding richer reflections (Butler-Kisber, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997).

**Study abroad:** I utilise a definition from the Forum on Education Abroad: “A subtype of Education Abroad that results in progress toward an academic degree at a student's home institution” (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2011, p. 12).

**Travelling students:** students who participate in the physical mobility component of a Hybrid Exchange Programme in addition to the virtual exchange component. In this study, the U.S. students are considered “travelling students” since they travelled from the U.S. to Brazil for the in-person exchange.

**Virtual exchange:** Virtual Exchange (VE) uses digital tools to connect people to people from different cultural contexts for facilitated education and intercultural exchange over a sustained period of time (Helm & van der Velden, 2021; O'Dowd, 2021a, The Stevens Initiative, 2021).

**Virtual Internationalisation:** Integrating passages from definitions proposed by Bruhn (2017) on “virtual internationalisation,” and by Crăciun (2019), de Wit et al. (2015), and Knight (2013), on “internationalisation” more broadly, this study defines Virtual Internationalisation as the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the

purposes, functions, delivery, teaching, research, and service functions of postsecondary education, with the help of information and communications technology (ICT), in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, make a meaningful contribution to society, and achieve intended academic, sociocultural, economic, and/or political goals.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

I define Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs) as a form of international education programming that includes virtual exchange (VE) and in-person exchange as part of a unified global learning experience. While “Blended Mobility” is the prevalent term in policy and scholarship (see for instance Carthy, 2022; Ghareb & Mohammed, 2019; Helm & O’Dowd, 2020; O’Dowd & Werner, 2024), in this dissertation I use the term “Hybrid Exchange Programme” (HEP) to reflect the specific design of my study, where some students are mobile and others are not, but all engage in meaningful exchange online and in person in Brazil. This also builds on the concept of “hybrid internationalization” proposed by Stallivieri (2022) as:

the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension in the objectives, functions and offer of postsecondary education, which takes place both in person and with the support of the digital technologies of information and communication (Stallivieri, 2022, as cited in Stallivieri et al., 2022).

In my definition of Hybrid Exchange Programmes, focusing on the “exchange” element, which takes place both virtually and in-person for students from both countries, avoids privileging the “mobility” dimension of the programme.

This literature review begins by placing HEPs within internationalisation frameworks, including Internationalisation of the Curriculum (Leask, 2022; Whitsed et al., 2024); Internationalisation at Home (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Helm & Guth, 2022; Soria & Troisi, 2014), Virtual Internationalisation (Bruhn, 2017; Finardi & Aşık, 2024; O’Dowd, 2023a; de Wit et al., 2015), and Critical Internationalisation (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; De Wit & Jones, 2022; George Mwangi et al., 2018; Raby, 2023; Stein, 2021). Next, it contextualises higher education

internationalisation against the backdrop of Brazil and the United States, where the students in this study are based. Then, it reviews literature related to the concept of global learning which is a prominent area of focus for this dissertation. Next, I review the small number of studies to date that are related to Hybrid Exchange Programmes. Because HEPs are an emerging and underexplored area of international education, I support this with literature from the two educational components that comprise the Hybrid Exchange Programme studied: VE and study abroad. I describe findings related to maximising student learning outcomes on such programmes, paying particular attention to global learning. I then delve into the more limited literature on programmes that blend VE and short-term study abroad. Finally, I assess the role of HEPs in terms of their potential to expand access, while also reviewing them through an equity lens. I conclude with directions for future research.

### **Placing Hybrid Exchange Programmes within Internationalisation Frameworks**

This section describes how Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs) fit into various internationalisation frameworks. Because they rely on in-person and online modalities, there is overlap in the frameworks needed to ground HEPs. This section explores HEPs' relationship to Internationalisation of the Curriculum (Leask, 2022; Whitsed et al., 2024); Internationalisation at Home (Beelen & Doscher, 2022; Beelen & Jones, 2015; Helm & Guth, 2022; Soria & Troisi, 2014), Virtual Internationalisation (Bruhn, 2017; Finardi & Aşık, 2024; O'Dowd, 2023a; de Wit et al., 2015), and Critical Internationalisation (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; De Wit & Jones, 2022; George Mwangi et al., 2018; Raby, 2023; Stein, 2021). Exploring these internationalisation frameworks within the context of this study is essential because each of these frameworks touches on a different facet of the research questions. Internationalisation at Home is key in exploring questions of access for the Brazilian students (RQ 4). Internationalisation of the

Curriculum is an essential foundation for understanding the ways in which the curricular and co-curricular design impact student learning (RQ 1, RQ 3). Virtual Internationalisation provides a context for exploring the ways in which technology can enable or constrain opportunities for student development and for broadening access (RQ 2, RQ 3). Finally, Critical Internationalisation lays an essential foundation for exploring questions related to power, equity, and reciprocity (RQ 4). Situating HEPs through these four frameworks contextualises the study within existing debates while illuminating issues of access for host-country students, the role of curricular design in shaping learning and connection, the opportunities and challenges of technologically mediated collaboration, and the power dynamics that influence Global-South/Global-North partnerships.

### **Internationalisation at Home**

Beelen and Jones (2015) define Internationalisation at Home (IaH) as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.” Building on this foundation, Beelen and Doscher (2022) situate VE practices (in this case, COIL) within IaH and global learning, pointing toward its relevance for making internationalisation more equitable and accessible. IaH emerged as a response to the recognition that only a small percentage of students participate in physical mobility and that institutions have a responsibility to provide meaningful global learning opportunities to all, regardless of whether students can study abroad. This can take the form of integrating intercultural perspectives into course content or fostering interaction between domestic and international students. By situating VE practices within Internationalisation at Home, Beelen and Doscher (2022) emphasise its potential to reach students historically excluded

from mobility opportunities. In this study, IaH takes the form of a VE centred on a business consulting project, which both integrates intercultural perspectives and fosters interaction.

A core concept of IaH is access. Beelen and Jones write that “while mobility can bring additional benefits for the mobile few, this should not be at the expense of internationalisation for all” (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 68). For Beelen and Jones, mobility on its own does not fall into IaH, but discussions of what students learn through their experiences abroad can contribute to IaH. In addition, when students share this information, “all students can benefit, rather than simply the mobile minority” (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 65).

Access is frequently touted as a benefit of IaH, but limitations remain. Van Mol and Pérez Encinas (2022) find that students with greater economic need are more likely to encounter barriers to participation in internationalisation activities, but that integrating internationalisation into the formal curriculum is one way to overcome such barriers. Yet Almeida and colleagues (2019) write that in a Brazilian context, “internationalization opportunities ‘at home’ are yet to be recognised by governmental policies as a gateway to improving the quality of internationalization practices of Brazilian higher education,” (p. 203), creating further barriers to participation. Virtual opportunities can play a role in shaping access. Woicolesco and colleagues (2022) argue that “the virtualization of internationalization has the potential to strengthen IaH, promote the development of international and intercultural competencies in the domestic HEI environment for all students, shifting the emphasis from elite internationalization to a more inclusive model” (p. 227). Together, these show how access to IaH can benefit from the utilisation of technology. It is also improved through integration into an academic context (Beelen & Doscher, 2022; Von Mol & Pérez Encinas, 2022).

IaH commonly includes VE, which is a core dimension of the Hybrid Exchange Programmes, but does not include student mobility across borders (Beelen & Jones, 2015). As such, HEPs can be difficult to situate within the literature since they comprise VE for all students and mobility for some students. O’Dowd (2023a) calls for further exploration of how VE can contribute to study abroad and IaH activities. He writes, “Bringing students into moderated contact with partners from other cultural or national backgrounds in collaborative learning initiatives is a logical addition to universities’ IaH initiatives but it can also serve to enrich physical mobility programmes” (O’Dowd, 2023a, p. 44). This suggests that HEPs have the potential to serve a dual role by supporting the goals of Internationalisation at Home while also strengthening the outcomes of mobility programmes. It also highlights the ways in which HEPs occupy a liminal space within internationalisation literature, requiring new ways of theorising this type of learning model.

These insights are important because they connect directly to the aims of this study. For RQ 1, they help frame how students’ intercultural, academic, and personal growth can be fostered not only through mobility but also through structured online interaction “at home.” For RQ 2, they contextualise the challenges of technologically mediated communication within broader questions of access. For RQ 4, they highlight why hybrid formats matter in contexts such as Brazil, where mobility is constrained by structural inequalities. HEPs can provide Global South students with meaningful access to internationalisation, even when physical mobility is out of reach (Finardi & Aşık, 2024; Woicolesco et al., 2022). At the same time, the lack of integration into the formal curriculum can limit inclusivity and potentially perpetuate uneven outcomes. As Helm and Guth (2022) note, Virtual Internationalisation can be utilised to support

both IaH and Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC). The next section discusses IoC in greater depth.

### **Internationalisation of the Curriculum**

The second area of exploration is Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC). Whereas IaH provides a broader framework, IoC provides a narrower lens for exploring the intersection of global education as it relates to the curriculum. Leask (2015) defines Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) as “the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the preparation, delivery, and outcomes of a programme of study” (p. 209). More recently, Whitsed et al. (2021) report that key stakeholders nevertheless view IoC as “a contested construct” shaped by ideological forces. They emphasise the need for “pedagogies of cosmopolitanism, decolonialization, diversity, responsibility, social cohesion, and engagement with local communities” (pp. 351, 361). Helm and Guth (2022) highlight the relevance of VE to both IaH and IoC and discuss how technology can be utilised to develop a wide range of global skills (2022).

Unlike IaH, mobility fits into the umbrella of IoC. In the context of the Hybrid Exchange Programme (HEP), the U.S. students’ experience fits well within this framework as they participate in a globally focused, credit-bearing course with intercultural learning objectives. For instance, the U.S. students attended international guest lecturers and were required to complete structured assignments that critically engaged with global learning. The U.S. students also participated in international mobility, which can be another facet of IoC. The Brazilian students participated in the VE as a form of continuing education that was not tied to degree progress but is better described as a co-curricular activity and therefore aligns better with Internationalisation at Home (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

HEPs can be viewed as sitting between IaH and IoC, and in some ways challenge traditional categorisations within the academic literature. For the U.S. students who travel and earn credit, there is greater alignment with IoC (Leask, 2015; Leask, 2022). For the Brazilian students who remain in their home country and do not earn credit, there is greater alignment with IaH (Beelen & Jones, 2015). It is important to note the role that Brazilian students' engagement with the VE might have been considered IoC if institutions had been able to formally recognise it. Their engagement within the course included being participants in a structured learning experience with defined goals and led by expert facilitators. Yet structural barriers, such as the lack of credit transfer agreements and misaligned academic calendars can put such recognition out of reach. This highlights how institutional practices can limit inclusive approaches to IoC. The next section on Virtual Internationalisation further explores the ways in which technology intersects with these frameworks. This raises the question—taken up in RQ 1 and RQ 3—of how curricular structures in HEPs shape students' experiences and learning outcomes.

### **Virtual Internationalisation**

The third internationalisation element explored is Virtual Internationalisation (Bruhn, 2017; Bruhn-Zass, 2022). Defining “Virtual Internationalisation” necessitates first grappling with the broader concept of “internationalisation,” a term that is highly contested and continually evolving (De Wit, 2023; Knight, 2003; Marginson, 2023). Bruhn (2017) explores this as she navigates the complexity of defining “Virtual Internationalisation.” In Bruhn's case, she builds on the widely cited definition of “internationalisation” written by Knight (2013). To Knight's definition, she adds the following words (emphasised):

*Virtual* internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of introducing an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the

delivery, purpose or functions of higher education *with the help of information and communications technology (ICT)*. (2017, p. 2)

Bruhn's addition of these key words: *with the help of information and communications technology (ICT)* effectively bridges the concepts of the virtual and the international. More recent scholarship has added several important dimensions to Knight's definition. De Wit et al. (2015) build on Knight by adding that internationalisation of higher education is "an intentional process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society" (De Wit et al., 2015, p. 29). The added text, particularly the focus on "meaningful contribution to society," holds particular relevance in the realm of VE, as it is often described in terms of its potential for providing access to a wider array of students (Helm, 2024; O'Dowd, 2023b; Whatley et al., 2022). Another key contribution to creating a definition for Virtual Internationalisation (VI) comes from Crăciun (2019), whose definition of internationalisation adds a layer of epistemological clarity, describing internationalisation as "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purposes, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education, in order to achieve intended academic, sociocultural, economic, and/or political goals" (p. 57). Drawing on concepts and phrasing from Bruhn's (2017) definition of "virtual internationalisation" and Knight (2013) de Wit et al., (2015) and Crăciun (2019) in their definition of "internationalisation," this study defines Virtual Internationalisation as such:

Virtual internationalisation is the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purposes, functions, delivery, teaching, research, and service functions of postsecondary education, with the help of information

and communications technology (ICT), in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, make a meaningful contribution to society, and achieve intended academic, sociocultural, economic, and/or political goals.

### *Growth of Virtual Internationalisation in 2020*

Virtual Internationalisation (VI) has experienced increased visibility since 2020, when efforts were expanded due to the travel restrictions imposed in 2020 at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (Beelen & Doscher, 2022; Helm & Guth, 2022; Raby & Zhang, 2022). Campuses hastily implemented workarounds to ensure educational continuity in the face of limitations on in-person interactions (Beelen & Doscher, 2022; Helm & Guth, 2022; Raby & Zhang, 2022). While Helm and Guth note that emergency solutions differ from intentionally designed virtual programmes, they write note that universities have begun to reenvision the role that technology can play in higher education as a result of the crisis (2022).

Despite the visibility that VI received as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Virtual Internationalisation is not a new field of study. In 2022, Bruhn-Zass conducted a systematic review that included 549 higher education conference abstracts relating to virtual and international education, from events taking place in 2012–2017, showing that Virtual Internationalisation was well established among scholars and practitioners prior to the pandemic (Bruhn-Zass, 2022). The heightened visibility of Virtual Internationalisation during and after the pandemic had particular significance for Hybrid Exchange Programmes. As practitioners gained experience using technology as a teaching tool, the conditions emerged for models like HEPs to gain traction.

Hybrid Exchange Programmes fall solidly into the VI framework as they, in part, utilise technology in order to integrate global learning as a core component of the experience. While

HEPs include study abroad for some students, I situate them within the field of Virtual Internationalisation, given that *all* participants utilise digital tools to facilitate cross-cultural collaboration (Bruhn-Zass, 2022; O’Dowd, 2023a). As Bruhn (2017) emphasises, VI is not simply about delivering education online but about employing information and communications technology (ICT) to intentionally foster global learning outcomes.

In the context of HEPs, Virtual Internationalisation (VI) works alongside Internationalisation at Home by expanding access to students who do not participate in mobility (Beelen & Jones, 2015; De Wit & Hunter, 2015; Helm & Guth, 2022). The virtual component complements Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) by offering a structured, credit-bearing experience for some participants (Leask, 2015; Leask, 2022), though equity challenges remain as the experience may not be credit bearing for all. Both Brazilian and U.S. students reported difficulties navigating technology in the VE phase, but for Brazilian students, these challenges were compounded by less institutional support (as the programme was extra-curricular), lack of academic credit, and scheduling challenges. HEPs reveal the ways in which IaH, IoC, and VI intersect, overlap, and at times produce tensions, particularly when institutional structures fail to formally recognise virtual components or integrate them into degree programmes in a way that is equitable to all participants (De Wit, 2023; Knight, 2015; Leask, 2022).

VI has increasingly become a foundational modality for internationalisation, one that has the potential to be intentionally embedded to shape learning, expand access, and promote equity (Bruhn-Zass, 2022; Helm & Guth, 2022). This study suggests that its potential can only be realised when VI is designed with equity in mind. These tensions set the stage for further exploration in RQ 2 and RQ 4, where this study investigates how technology mediates student experiences and whether HEPs can create equitable opportunities for all participants. The

following section on Critical Internationalisation builds on these insights by examining how power, reciprocity, and structural inequalities influence student access and outcomes and how HEPs have the potential to challenge or reinforce global higher education hierarchies.

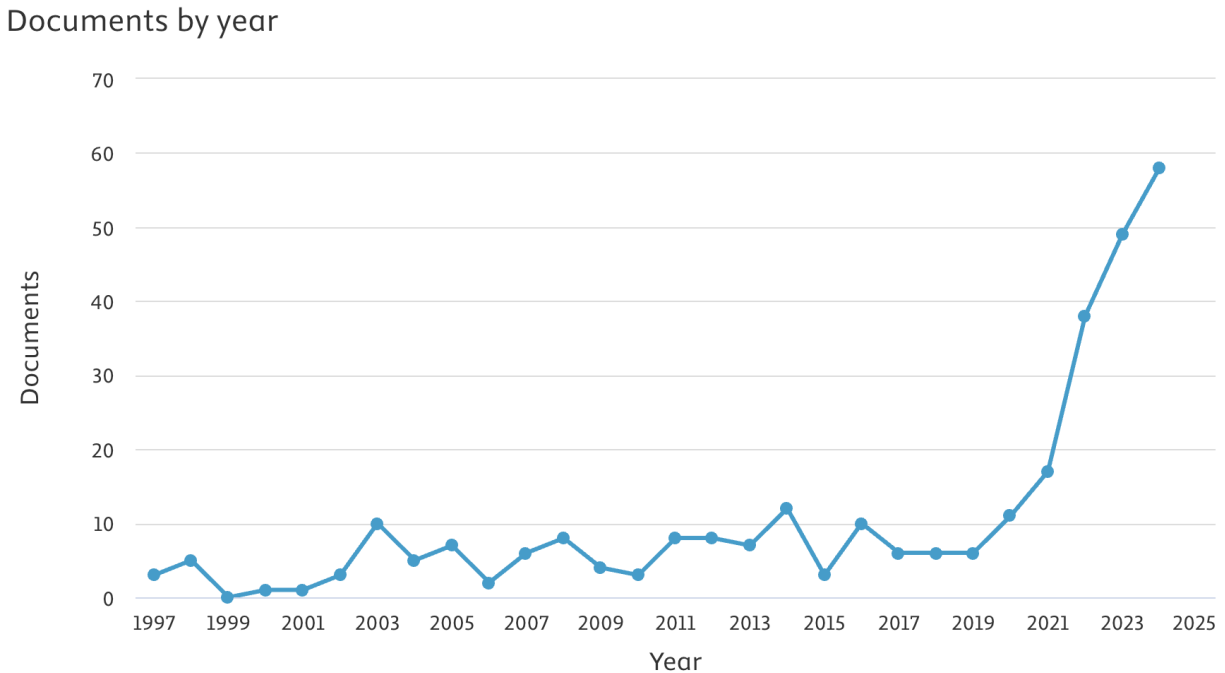
### **Critical Internationalisation**

The final component of internationalisation pertinent to this study is Critical Internationalisation (CI). CI is an increasingly important framework within international higher education, reflecting a growing recognition that internationalisation practices are not inherently positive or even neutral (De Wit & Jones, 2022; Stein, 2021). Interactions between Global South and Global North participants, such as the ones in this case study, can highlight asymmetries. Critical Internationalisation emphasises that these dynamics are part of broader challenges, including how internationalisation can reproduce coloniality, racism, and linguistic dominance that privileges the Global North (Raby, 2023). Critical Internationalisation is essential in interrogating such inequities while also imagining new possibilities for internationalisation.

Emerging IHE pedagogies such as HEPs are developing within an environment where Critical Internationalisation remains marginal (Stein, 2021) yet is gaining increasing prominence in international higher education discourse. For example, a Scopus review that I conducted for “Critical Internationalisation” or “critical internationalization” shows that only six publications cited “Critical Internationalisation” or “critical internationalization” in the years 2017, 2018, and 2019, whereas this number surged to 58 publications in 2024, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Scopus Search for “Critical Internationalisation” or “Critical Internationalization” 1997–2024*



However, this remains relatively small when contrasted with the documents ranging from 79–350 annually for the terms “higher education internationalisation” or “higher education internationalization” in the same database during that time frame.

Within Critical Internationalisation scholars, such as George Mwangi and colleagues (2018) argue for the need for critical scholarship to stand in counterpoint to the positive and depoliticised portrayals of internationalisation that make up much of the literature. Likewise, de Wit and Jones (2022) argue that internationalisation must move away from competitive models toward cooperative ones, and that this must involve addressing colonial legacies and balancing local and global needs, which are key components of CI. This builds on scholarship that highlights the relevance gap that internationalisation may have for some stakeholders. Vavrus and Pekol (2015), for example, underscore that “individuals and institutions in the Global South

experience internationalization differently, and sometimes only marginally.” (p. 7). These authors include a description of an international dialogue held by international education organisations in South Africa in 2014, including many from Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. A key recommendation put forth by the participants was for “equal and ethical higher education partnerships (p. 17). One way that the authors identify to achieve that is through “‘relationships of reciprocity,’ which scholars like Hebert and Abdi (2013, p. 24) call for in international education...” (2015, p. 17). Vavrus and Pekol write that aiming for “reciprocity” may be more achievable than aiming for equality “given the unequal world in which we live” (2015, p. 17).

This sentiment is echoed in the increasing calls for equity over equality. Particularly in the realm of VI (Virtual Internationalisation), authors such as Erbstein and colleagues (2022), O’Dowd (2023b), Satar (2021), and Wimpenny et al. (2022) have challenged practitioners to forefront equity in the development of VI programmes. As Da Silva and colleagues (2023) argue, even projects with decolonial aspirations can become derailed by the ways in which universities are so structurally tied to the legacies of coloniality. These scholars show that emerging pedagogies, like HEPs, must be grounded in Critical Internationalisation to foster internationalisation that is relevant, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of diverse stakeholders. Nevertheless, despite growing calls within Critical Internationalisation scholarship to embed principles of reciprocity, decoloniality, and equity into international education, there remains limited research examining how these principles are operationalised in practice. This gap provides the foundation for RQ 4, which explores how equity and reciprocity are enacted or constrained within South-North exchanges such as this one.

## **Conclusion**

HEPs and their component parts intersect in different ways with these four broad segments of internationalisation: Internationalisation at Home, Internationalisation of the Curriculum, Virtual Internationalisation, and Critical Internationalisation. The VE component aligns with Internationalisation at Home and Virtual Internationalisation. In this study, the study abroad experience aligns with Internationalisation of the Curriculum, and the HEP in its entirety contains elements of Internationalisation of the Curriculum, and Virtual Internationalisation. HEPs may also be contextualised through the lens of Critical Internationalisation, as the inherent dynamics of international exchange present challenges in achieving equitable partnerships. In this study, HEPs fill many different roles and provide many different forms of global learning opportunities. They can also pose challenges as programme designers seek to create programmes that can meet the needs of multiple stakeholders and fulfil diverse global learning objectives and create equitable partnerships. Reflecting on the Scopus review, I found that little is known about how programmes in which Global South and Global North students interact both virtually and in person and how practitioners can navigate challenges of reciprocity, linguistic hegemony, and uneven institutional power. This study therefore seeks to illuminate how HEPs have the potential to translate the principles of Critical Internationalisation into concrete practices that shape student learning, belonging, and global engagement.

### **Locating the Study within Brazilian and American International Higher Education**

As this research focuses on Brazilian and American university students engaged together in an international education programme, it is useful to provide a brief overview of higher education internationalisation in both Brazil and the U.S. to understand the similarities, differences, and confluences. The following subsections describe key mobility initiatives and

provide a high-level overview of mobility between the two countries. As the findings of this study show, national contexts shaped students' experiences within their Hybrid Exchange Programme. Structural inequalities related to language and mobility flows shaped students' motivations for participation and their overall experience.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Before exploring Brazilian higher education internationalisation, it is important to acknowledge my positionality as a U.S.-based scholar and practitioner. As someone educated in the U.S. and Europe who is not a Portuguese speaker, my interpretations are influenced by Global North frameworks. During my fieldwork in Brazil, I approached my engagement with an ethnographic orientation (Spradley, 1980), observing and participating while reflecting critically on my own assumptions. I sought to mitigate these limitations by deeply engaging Brazilian literature and collaborating with Brazilian colleagues. This reflexive approach informs the analyses presented in this study. By foregrounding these positionalities, I seek to approach this study with humility and reflexivity, remaining attentive to the risks of imposing external interpretations on Brazilian higher education contexts.

### **The Brazilian Context of International Higher Education Practice**

Mobility has been an important component of higher education in Brazil since its inception. With the first university established in 1808, students seeking higher education prior to this time were typically educated in Europe (Costa et al., 2023). A key milestone for Brazilian International Higher Education (IHE) was the implementation of *Estudantes-Convênio de Graduação* (Exchange for Undergraduate Students Programme) in the 1960s (Passoni, 2019). Since that time, the focus of governmental programmes has been increasingly directed toward

the outbound mobility of Brazilian students, typically for the purposes of seeking a full degree abroad (Passoni, 2019).

The Science without Borders programme was a major initiative running from 2011–2015 and funding approximately 100,000 scholarships for overseas study (Passoni, 2019). The focus was on the enhancement of technical skills in students that would yield greater outcomes for Brazilian corporations (Passoni, 2019). As Science without Borders had linguistic pre-requisites that excluded many students, a programme called “English without Borders” (later, “Languages without Borders”) was developed in 2012 in the attempt to provide a solution (Passoni, 2019).

At present, Finardi and Aşık (2024) write that, while VE holds significant potential to strengthen IaH in Brazil and across the Global South, challenges such as curriculum integration, technological access, faculty training, and institutional recognition need to be addressed in order for VE to meet its potential in this region. Woicolesco and colleagues (2022) are optimistic that virtual tools will continue to be used in post Covid-19 pandemic. These tensions are the basis for RQ 2 and RQ 4, which explore how technology and programme design shape equitable access to HEPs.

### ***Equity and Access in Brazilian Mobility Programmes***

As in other contexts, equity has been difficult to achieve in the Brazilian mobility context. The Science without Borders programme has been criticised for lacking broader support and placing a burden on Brazilian scientific agencies like CNPQ [*Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico*] and CAPES [*Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior*] without offering them adequate support (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021). Its emphasis on sending students to Anglophone countries necessitated the creation of the “English without Borders” programme to help students meet the English requirements needed to

participate in many of the mobility opportunities. It was also criticised for the lack of support to help mobile students with cultural and academic adaptations needed to study abroad (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021). The programme was discontinued in 2016 after funding 92,880 fellowships (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021). Seventy-nine per cent of fellowships were awarded to undergraduates studying in the Global North for a semester or academic year (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021). Martínez (2016) and Chiappa and Finardi (2021) posit that this push toward English language education was driven in part by the lack of visibility of Brazilian science research published in Portuguese, despite high levels of publication among Brazilian scientists (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021).

The implementation of mobility programmes in Brazil has also been criticised because of the way in which such programmes do not adequately support diverse students. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are not well represented as recipients of government mobility fellowships, most of whom did not come from low-income families (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021). The disparities caused by limited English education in Brazil's public primary and secondary schools amplify inequalities by limiting access to internationally funded programmes wherein English is a prerequisite (Borges, 2022). Students with the means to do so typically rely on the private market to augment their English-speaking skills (Borges, 2022).

The United States is the top destination for Brazilian students pursuing education abroad, with 16,877 Brazilian students enrolled in U.S. institutions in the 2022–2023 academic year (IIE Open Doors, 2024). In contrast, of the 280,716 U.S. students who studied abroad during the same period, 1,547 chose to study in Brazil, which represents less than 1% of total participants (Institute of International Education, 2024). Likewise, Brazil ranks 30th among destinations for U.S. study abroad participants in 2024. According to the most recent data from the Institute of

International Education, 2023–2024 was the third-highest year on record for Brazilian student enrolment in the U.S., following a prior peak between 2014 and 2016 (Institute of International Education, 2024) that was likely driven by funding from Science without Borders. In the Brazilian context, scholars such as Borges (2022) have understood this trend as being linked to the governmental programmes prioritising studying in the Global North and privileging English language skills over other languages. Concerns about English are further contextualised by Hoyos Ensuncho (2023) who quotes Maldonado-Torres (2016) in writing “Coloniality survives colonialism...” Hoyos Ensuncho further contextualises this by writing, “This means that even though colonialism came to an end with the independence of former colonies, the practices of domination and oppression still persist and impact the present” (Hoyos Ensuncho, 2023, p. 14). According to Hoyos Ensuncho, this can illuminate the ongoing patterns in which the prioritisation of English-speaking destinations both reflects and amplifies existing inequalities (Hoyos Ensuncho, 2023). In addition to the imbalance in flows of students between the countries, research on international students is largely focused on “South-to-North” migration (Mittelmeier et al., 2024, p. 26) and Mittelmeier and colleagues cite a dearth of scholarship on “new global host destinations” like Brazil (Mittelmeier et al., 2024, p. 26) which is particularly true in the research on programmes that blend mobility and VE. This gap frames RQ 4’s investigation of equity and reciprocity in a Brazilian exchange.

This dissertation responds to calls for greater attention to “new global host destinations” (Mittelmeier et al., 2024) by centring Brazil as both a physical and virtual site of internationalisation. Whereas research on International Higher Education has historically focused on South-to-North mobility, this study explores North-to-South mobility in conjunction with

Brazilian students' experiences. In so doing, it contributes to addressing the imbalance in existing literature.

### *Virtual Internationalisation in Brazil*

Following global trends, internationalisation in Brazil shifted from a focus on outbound mobility and research partnerships in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic. This period was marked by an expansion of Virtual Internationalisation (Cordova et al., 2021; Finardi & Aşık, 2024; Woicolesco et al., 2022). Educators began to employ webinars, VE, and other forms of online engagement to support students' learning (Woicolesco et al., 2022). Woicolesco describes this as the "virtualisation of Internationalisation at Home" and sees it as a new stage for internationalisation in Brazil (2022). Finardi and Aşık (2024) argue that this shift not only amplifies Southern perspectives and broadens access but also reshapes Brazil's engagement with the Global North by reducing the economic obstacles typically linked to academic mobility.

While some see the potential for offering more accessible global learning experiences (Woicolesco, 2022), Cordova et al. (2021) warn that the ease of connecting across borders could threaten internationalisation in Brazil. If Brazilian students choose to enrol in courses offered by highly ranked foreign universities, it could threaten the financial sustainability of the local institutions they would have otherwise attended (Cordova et al., 2021). In this programme, however, the Brazilian students remained enrolled at their home universities, and so this concern was not borne out. Further research is needed to understand the ways in which VI can ultimately enhance or threaten educational opportunities within Brazilian institutions. These questions motivate RQ 2's focus on how technology mediates participation in cross-cultural exchange and the outcomes that are produced.

### **The U.S. Context of International Higher Education Practice**

Study abroad in the U.S. context was extremely limited in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Dietrich, 2018), but international education in the U.S. context expanded after the Second World War, in large part due to the national security benefits that the U.S. government saw in developing foreign language and area studies expertise among its populace (De Wit & Merckx, 2012). The G.I. Bill provided funding to returning veterans which propelled the growth of the college population from 1.3 million U.S. students in 1939 to over 2 million in 1946 (Bound & Turner, 2002).

In the 1960s, it became more commonplace for U.S. universities to have their own study abroad programmes and to establish exchange programmes with overseas universities (Rhodes et al., 2014). Legislation passed in 1965 enabled university students to utilise federal grants and loans to pay for study abroad experiences and enabled study abroad to become a more integral part of global learning on U.S. campuses (Mukherjee, 2012). In the period between 1965 and 2011, the population of students studying outside their home country had grown from 250,000 to 3.7 million (De Wit & Merckx, 2012) and in the period from 2011–2018, it grew to 5.6 million (OECD, 2020).

Exchanges came to be seen as peacebuilding initiatives, with the Institute for International Education (IIE) established just after the end of the First World War and the Fulbright being established at the conclusion of the Second World War (Ogden & Brewer, 2023). Study abroad organisations including NAFSA and CIEE were founded shortly thereafter and were instrumental in supporting inbound and outbound mobility (Ogden & Brewer, 2023).

*Equity and Access in U.S. Mobility Programmes*

Steady growth continued as college became more accessible, and significant governmental initiatives continued to support international study, including the Boren Awards (1991), the Gilman Scholarship (2000), 100,000 Strong in China (2009) and 100,000 Strong in the Americas (2011) (Dietrich, 2018). Dietrich highlights emerging trends in US study abroad such as efforts to increase access and diversity, the rise of short-term and non-credit programmes, enhanced focus on health, safety, and risk management, and the growing professionalization and standardization of the field (Dietrich, 2018).

*Virtual Internationalisation in the U.S.*

In the U.S. context, VE gained prominence primarily through Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which was developed in the early 2000s at the State University of New York (SUNY). The SUNY COIL Center was established in 2006 to formalise training, foster partnership building, and host conferences. External grants from the Stevens Initiative and U.S. Embassy have offered financial support to many universities to support this work (Nolan, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic prevented many students from studying abroad between 2020–2022. While participation has rebounded, the recovery remains uneven. Surveys indicate that by 2023, only three-quarters of study abroad offices had returned to pre-pandemic levels (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2023) and fewer than 70% of these offices reported growth in 2024 (Dietrich, 2025). Ongoing challenges, including understaffing and geopolitical instability serve as constant reminders that internationalisation strategies need to be comprehensive and flexible, and that virtual forms of global learning will continue to play an important role. This context

situates RQ 2's exploration of how Virtual Internationalisation can be a way of adding resiliency to international education programming.

This subsection outlined national contexts and recent trends in both Brazil and the U.S. The next subsection will clarify the conceptual language used to describe the outcomes of these practices, including terms such as “global learning,” which is utilised in this study.

### **Global Learning and Related Terms**

This section defines key terms related to global learning and international education to situate the study within broader conceptual debates. Many international education programmes—whether VE, study abroad, or HEPs—aim to foster intercultural growth or related outcomes such as intercultural competence, global learning, or global awareness, with over twenty different terms related to this concept (Fantini, 2009). To clarify how this study approaches such concepts, and how I integrated it into the research design, the following subsection reviews commonly used terms and establishes a definition for “global learning,” which is the term utilised in this study. This section begins with a review of “intercultural competence” (Deardorff, 2004; Deardorff, 2006), then moves to “global competence,” (Morais & Ogden, 2011), then “global awareness” (DeLoach et al., 2021), “global citizenship” (UNESCO, 2014), and “global learning” (Deardorff & Whitehead, 2023). The following subsection reviews these commonly used terms and establishes a definition for “global learning,” the central concept used in this study, as a foundation for analysing student experiences and outcomes.

### **Intercultural Competence**

In a 2006 article Deardorff “documents consensus among top intercultural scholars and academic administrators on what constitutes intercultural competence and the best ways to measure this complex construct” (p. 242). She writes that the “top-rated definition was one in

which intercultural competence was defined as ‘the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes’” (Deardorff, 2004, p. 144). In a more recent article from 2017, Nguyen confirms that this definition has held up writing:

In a very broad sense, researchers agree that intercultural competence involves the ability to adapt behaviour and communication to intercultural contexts using a variety of skills and knowledge. (Bennett, 2009; Bird et al., 2010; Deardorff, 2006; Deardorff, 2011; Gertsen, 1990; Schaettim et al., 2009) (Nguyen, 2017, p. 110).

Despite the widespread usage of competence, that framework risks presenting culture as static and immutable (see for instance Lekas et al., 2020; Whatley et al., 2023). “Competence” may suggest something that can be acquired rather than as a process that exists along a continuum. Frameworks like intercultural growth or intercultural humility (Lekas et al., 2020; Whatley et al., 2023) can describe the dynamic process through which a student’s outlook may change over time. Recognising one’s own limitations and using mistakes as opportunities for learning can be a key facet in intercultural growth or humility. Relatedly, O’Dowd also notes that within VE, misunderstandings in intercultural communication can be thought of as “teachable moments” (2023a, p. 81). As seen in findings from RQ 1 and RQ 3, students describe learning through discomfort, echoing that “teachable moments” (O’Dowd 2023a) are central to growth. Moving away from “competence” frameworks highlights the way that learning from misunderstandings can play an important role in the learning journey. This motivates the exploration of student growth over the course of the programme, as explored in RQs 1 and 3.

### **Global Competence**

Global competence is another widely used term in this realm. Morais and Ogden (2011) define “global competence” as, “understood as having an open mind while actively seeking to understand others’ cultural norms and expectations and leveraging this knowledge to interact, communicate, and work effectively outside one’s environment (American Council on Education, 2008; Deardorff & Hunter, 2006; Peterson et al., 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)” (Morais & Ogden, 2011, p. 4). Morais and Ogden (2011) write that globally competent students possess three key traits: self-awareness, intercultural communication, and global knowledge (Morais & Ogden, 2011). More recent work by Devereux and Glenn (2022) caution that programmes focused on global competence may inadvertently perpetuate imbalanced power relations and create the conditions for one set of students to gain knowledge while the other set becomes the subject of study (Devereux & Glenn, 2022). There is a risk that global competence frameworks could potentially cast learning opportunities in a more extractive way rather than prioritising mutual learning, something explored in greater depth through RQ 4.

### **Global Awareness**

DeLoach and colleagues (2021) define global awareness as “an awareness and knowledge of cultural differences and global issues” (DeLoach et al., 2021, p. 101). Goldstein’s 2022 comprehensive literature review on global intercultural competence outcomes in short-term study abroad finds 23 sources that demonstrate increased global awareness as a result of short-term study abroad (p. 28). Goldstein notes the potential for publication bias and recommends that future research examines the extent to which less favourable outcomes may be underrepresented in the scholarly record. This is particularly relevant given that many of the reviewed studies in this dissertation focus on outcomes such as increased awareness, which may be easier to

demonstrate and publish than more complex or nuanced constructs. The concept of awareness may also be a more manageable threshold to meet than “competence,” “humility,” or “citizenship.” While it is attainable, it may also be seen as a “minimal” goal. It can represent the first step in a longer journey but could be read as overly superficial in some instances. One key takeaway is the idea of global learning as a process, which is why RQ 1 explores changes over time as participants move through, and later reflect on, their experiences in the programme.

### **Global Citizenship**

UNESCO defines the goal of global citizenship education as seeking to “empower learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world” (UNESCO, 2014, p. 15). VE has been shown to help students demonstrate attributes related to global citizenship, such as overcoming stereotypes and increasing foreign-language communication skills (O’Dowd, 2021).

Guimarães and Finardi (2021) offer a critical approach to global citizenship education, highlighting the importance of agency, dialogue, and intercultural collaboration. They advocate for the creation of “Thirdspaces,” or “arenas where global citizens share responsibility with national, international and global stakeholders, to address complex problems that transcend borders of difference” (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021, p. 645). They describe these spaces as technology-enabled, multilingual environments wherein the convergence of diverse epistemologies can challenge dominant Western knowledge frameworks. Their approach emphasises the integration of Technology-Enabled Collaborative Thirdspaces and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which can support cross-cultural dialogue and promote glonacal (global, national, local) citizenship values. By centring participation, co-construction of

knowledge, and digital inclusion, the Thirdspace model reframes global citizenship education as a dialogic, borderless process aimed at developing criticality and a commitment to social justice. In doing so, it critiques traditional practices that see global citizenship education through a “perpetuation/transmission model” (p. 650).

Stein (2020) critiques traditional approaches to global citizenship education, arguing that they are untenable at present. She calls on educators to reimagine global citizenship education as a process that encourages self-reflection, accountability, and ethical leadership. However compelling, Stein’s vision may be too diffuse for this study as it purposefully resists prescriptive outcomes, making it difficult to implement programmatically. While this dissertation rejects a static “competence” model, it still emphasises the importance of students’ growth and expanded perspectives as desirable outcomes. This dissertation will instead operationalise global learning in a way that can be more directly applied to the design and analysis of the HEP and explored in the next section on global learning.

### **Global Learning**

This study adopts the term “global learning” to guide the research design and questions, based on Deardorff and Whitehead (2023). The global learning rubric that they cite from AAC&U (2014) is illustrative of the approach they describe. In this case, global learning is defined in the rubric as, “a critical analysis of and an engagement with complex, interdependent global systems and legacies (e.g., natural, physical, social, culture, economic, and political) and their implications for people’s lives and the earth’s sustainability.” Deardorff and Whitehead (2023) outline several important shifts in how global learning is conceptualised and assessed. These include moving from “programme- or course-centred assessment” to “learner-centred assessment”; from relying on “traditional forms of evidence” to incorporating “authentic

evidence”; from focusing solely on students’ “self-perspectives” to including “multiple perspectives”; from “standardised approaches” to “tailored and customised” ones; from viewing learning as “separate” to seeing it holistically; and from emphasising “results” to valuing learning as an ongoing “process” (Deardorff & Whitehead, pp. 157–158).

The definitions that Deardorff and Whitehead (2023) draw on offer a broader and more process-oriented approach to the outcomes and educational experience that students or learners have when engaging with global and international experiences. This definition follows scholars such as Lekas et al., 2020 who have been critical of terms that utilised “competence” frameworks since these present culture as static or immutable. Likewise, it suggests that these skills can be fully acquired rather than seeing them as abilities that exist along a continuum and that are capable of changing over time and perhaps can never be fully realised (Lekas et al., 2020). This process-oriented perspective is evident in research by Whatley et al. (2023), who propose “cultural humility,” which they describe as a lifelong, reflective process characterized by openness, respect, and a self-aware attitude toward cultural difference.

Deardorff and Whitehead’s definition also applies in this study because it includes international experiences in both curricular and co-curricular spaces, thus being fully applicable to all participants in this programme. In this study, global learning is defined as an ongoing process through which students critically engage with diverse perspectives, reflect on their positionalities, and explore ethical engagement within global networks. In this framing, learning is dynamic rather than static, and growth is privileged over acquisition of competencies. In viewing global learning as dynamic and process oriented, this study is able centre student reflections rather than focus on the attainment of fixed competencies.

This subsection provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how students in Hybrid Exchange Programmes engage with complex global learning processes. By defining the parameters and nuances of terms including intercultural competence, global awareness, and global citizenship, and by ultimately grounding the study in a process-oriented understanding of global learning, this section directly informs RQ 1, which examines how students' growth evolves across programme phases. It also connects to RQ 2's focus on how technological and curricular designs influence students' engagement in intercultural communication. Additionally, the critique of extractive or static models of "competence" connects to RQ 3's emphasis on student agency. It also speaks to RQ 4 by clarifying how these learning outcomes may be shaped by different socio-economic and institutional contexts for U.S. and Brazilian students.

Having situated global learning as the guiding framework for this study, the next section explores how findings from literature on study abroad, VE, and HEPs supports this study. It then shifts into the areas of learning outcomes, pedagogical interventions, issues of accessibility. Finally, it explores issues of equity.

### **Literature on Virtual Exchange and Short-Term Study Abroad**

This section reviews the learning outcomes associated with VE and short-term study abroad programmes. Although Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs) are the central focus of this study, relatively little literature directly addresses them as a distinct programme type. Because of this gap, I draw on research from adjacent models that form the component parts of the HEP: VE and short-term study abroad programmes. These outcomes inform expectations for hybrid contexts.

### **Global Learning in Relation to Virtual Exchange**

Many studies show global learning as a benefit of virtual programmes, such as VE and COIL. Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus (2016) and de Castro et al. (2018) conclude that students who participate in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) showed intercultural growth while working in a fully virtual environment. Likewise, Soria and Troisi (2014) find that participating in Internationalisation at Home activities has a positive effect on global learning (Soria & Troisi, 2014). Similarly, when blending VE with mobility, literature echoes these findings and describes how VE can be used to enhance global learning when integrated into blended programmes (Carthy, 2021; O’Dowd & Werner, 2024).

Commander and colleagues (2022) use the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale and compare pre- and post-VE scores to identify trends based on major field of study, student demographics, and what they call “dosage,” as measured in contact hours. The research shows statistically significant differences in pre- and post-test scores for “continuous learning, self-awareness, interpersonal engagement, and world orientation” (Commander et al., 2022, p. 11). The authors also examined whether there would be trends in the scores related to students’ academic disciplines, but none emerged in their data (p. 11). The authors also studied “dosage,” which they calculated in terms of number of hours and found “no clear relationship between dosage and gain in scores, with at least as much variability within groups as between groups” (Commander et al., 2022). These findings offer a point of comparison for this study, wherein the combination of virtual and in-person exchange reinforced student learning across multiple dimensions over the full course of the programme.

In a 2021 article, O’Dowd analysed 345 student VE learning portfolios and identified several themes. These themes included how VE can help students overcome stereotypes, how

VE can help students gain confidence in communicating in their second language, and how it makes English language use more relevant for students. The study also compares two models of VE within the dataset (telecollaborative and transnational exchanges) and finds that the design of tasks can influence the outcomes of this activity. Whereas bilingual exchanges “served to conceptualize VE as language practice,” “transnational exchanges led students to focus more on developing collaboration skills, digital skills, and the importance of cultural differences in communication styles” (p. 11). O’Dowd (2021) demonstrates that task design shapes VE outcomes, but his study was not intended to consider how VE might interact with subsequent in-person exchange. This dissertation extends his findings by exploring how the virtual and mobility phases shape both linguistic and collaborative outcomes.

### *Collaborative Skills and Team Building in VE*

Several other authors find team-based work to be beneficial in enhancing student’s global learning through project work in VE contexts. Peraza and Furumura (2022) examine Project Based Learning (PBL) within a VE context. They describe PBL as “an active and dynamic approach to language teaching that makes it possible for foreign language students to gain transferable and applicable knowledge, skills and insights through collaboration” (Peraza & Furumura 2022, p. 2). The authors gathered data from participants in a 10-week VE. These participants were Costa Rican and Japanese language learners. Peraza and Furumura (2022) write that the qualitative data “showed evidence of improvement and growing awareness in relation to the development of linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills” (p. 9).

Ndubuisi et al., (2022) conduct research involving global virtual teams (GVTs), which they define as “geographically distributed individuals working together with the support of technology” (p. 260). Alongside collaborative work between international students, the

participants were supported by curriculum that included “intercultural communication and sensitivities, cultural identity, and GVT concepts” (p. 265). Throughout the programme, additional curricular content was made available that included intercultural communication and related topics (p. 265). The study gathered data pre- and post-VE and also integrated focus groups alongside surveys. Through exit surveys and focus groups, the researchers found that students had developed an intercultural skill set that equipped them to communicate effectively across international teams (p. 270).

Even in cases in which adequate guidance is provided, the process of creating virtual exchanges can be fraught. Swartz et al. (2020) also focus on team-based work. In this case, the student participants were based in Scotland, Germany, and Portugal. Before and after they participated in a six-week programme, the students completed an online intercultural sensitivity survey based on the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale created by Chen and Starosta (2000). The survey included additional questions related to intercultural communication competence (p. 65). The authors did not see increases in all the categories that they measured. Their results were very mixed and some feedback from students ran counter to their goals (Chen & Starosta, 2000). For instance, students became *more* likely to answer, “I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally distinct persons” (p. 66). The authors did, however, find that students demonstrated an “increased awareness of verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal communication” (p. 68). The authors attribute some of the negative feedback as indications of “a rise in consciousness concerning the difficulties of real interaction with other cultures” (p. 74). They posited that students realised that cultural interactions can be more challenging than they might have initially expected. They also attribute some of the elements of the course that students disliked, such as, “time zones, diverging deadlines, and expectations” as additional factors in

their feelings of negativity toward the experience and the subsequent reported declines in some areas related to intercultural growth (p. 74). These studies inform RQ 2's focus on task design, facilitation, and technological mediation.

### *Language Development in VE*

Within this context, it is also useful to consider the impact of VE on foreign language development. O'Dowd (2017) notes that VE has been seen as a potential tool among foreign language instructors since the early 1990s (O'Dowd, 2017). It had—and continues to have—the potential to provide some of the benefits of language development that had previously only been available to those who could live overseas (O'Dowd, 2023b). However, O'Dowd points out that the opportunity to live overseas is limited to a small subset of the population with only 13.5% of European students, 1.9% of U.S. students, and 2.6% of the world's population of students having had the opportunity to do so in recent years (O'Dowd, 2023b). VE provides students with an environment to learn language in a conversational setting that has more similarities to the ways in which language is frequently used (Kinging, 2016).

In summary, VE can aid students in overcoming stereotypes (O'Dowd, 2021) and help them gain confidence communicating in a second language (O'Dowd, 2021). It can also aid in the development of transferable skills in the realm of collaboration, communication, and technological abilities (O'Dowd, 2021; Peraza & Furumura, 2022) and project planning and coordination (Ndubuisi et al., 2022). It can also make students more interculturally aware and appreciative of diversity (Ndubuisi et al., 2022). That said, VE is not without challenges and factors such as time differences, competing priorities, and unmet expectations can result in negative experiences for students (Swartz et al., 2020). The next section discusses global learning outcomes in a short-term study abroad context.

### **Global Learning in Relation to Short-Term Study Abroad**

This subsection explores how global learning and related terms are found to be outcomes of short-term study abroad programmes. Short-term study abroad programmes are typically defined as study abroad programmes under eight weeks in duration (Bradly & Iskhakova, 2023). This is also the timespan utilised by the Institute of International Education (IIE), the non-profit U.S.-based policy group that compiles international education statistics for colleges and universities in the United States.

Several studies offer insight into outcomes related to short-term study abroad, which are useful in exploring the potential impact of Hybrid Exchange Programmes. Nguyen (2017) utilised the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale to measure students' growth before and after short-term programmes and found significant increases in perceptions of intercultural competence, which she connected to intentional choices within the design of the programme, for instance, conducting roundtable discussions with local community members (Nguyen, 2017). Programme interventions are significant. DeLoach and colleagues (2021) find that short-term programmes can achieve similar results to longer ones when they contain "depth" defined as focused and reflective interaction with host cultures. Similarly, Vande Berg et al. (2009) use the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) before and after both short- and long-term study abroad programmes to measure changes in score among U.S. students who studied abroad. While they find that longer programmes produced greater gains, their findings also indicate that short-term participants benefit when interventions such as language courses, collaboration with peers, or engagement with locals are present (Vande Berg et al., 2009). This is similar to findings by Dwyer (2004) whose longitudinal study showed that year-long programmes yielded the greatest

impact, but that shorter programmes still led to growth in self-confidence, tolerance of ambiguity, and maturity.

Based on the data presented in these studies, it is difficult to account for selection bias where already-motivated students may be most likely to choose longer options. What is clear is that short-term and long-term programmes can foster intercultural growth, and the extent to which these outcomes are realised often depends on programme design and pedagogical choices. Given that Hybrid Exchange Programmes integrate elements of both VE and study abroad, understanding what design features make each modality effective is essential for developing impactful HEPs. These findings set up this study's exploration of RQ 1, RQ 2, and RQ 3, wherein task structure, reflection, and facilitation are central components of the learning process across phases. The next section discusses findings that demonstrate effective pedagogical interventions. The literature on VE and short-term study abroad underscores that both modalities can support global learning, but that outcomes are shaped by design choices. The next section explores how pedagogical interventions—such as task structure, reflection activities, and facilitator involvement—can enhance learning and support students' development.

### **Pedagogical Interventions to Maximise Learning Outcomes**

The next theme explored in this literature review is pedagogical interventions to maximise learning outcomes. Building on the work from the previous section, this subsection seeks to identify and categorise elements of programme design that contribute to maximising learning outcomes for both VE and short-term study abroad. These programmatic features differ due to the modalities of the two programmes, but one area of overlap is the idea that pushing students to engage and experience a level of uncertainty can be helpful in their development of global learning skills. This can be through problem-solving with international teammates or

engaging with people in a second language. These findings raise important questions about how programme design can influence learning outcomes, particularly which pedagogical strategies may enhance the impact of both VE and short-term study abroad experiences. The next two subsections overview practices from the literature that have been shown to be effective in maximising student learning outcomes.

### **Maximising Learning Outcomes for Virtual Exchange Programme Design**

Several scholars have identified practices that were effective in creating environments that were conducive to meeting the learning objectives for their VE. These include problem-solving, engagement, organisation, being part of a comprehensive internationalisation programme, documenting findings, curricular integration, and guidance. While little research provides insight specifically into good practices for Hybrid Exchange Programmes, O'Dowd (2023a) highlights the importance of “[developing] methods outlining how both physical and virtual periods of blended mobility courses should be combined and what types of activities are most suited to each stage of the blended course” (p. 20). His suggestions include guest lectures, icebreakers, discussions of course materials. This can be done both synchronously and asynchronously to give English-language learners time to reflect if needed (O'Dowd, 2023a).

Many Virtual Internationalisation studies emphasise the role of instructors in facilitating intercultural growth (Chen et al., 2006; Jørgensen et al., 2020). Jørgensen et al. write that VE alone will not necessarily help students to develop the intercultural skills that they need, but that instructors play a central role in facilitating teamwork and ensuring that learning outcomes are foregrounded (Jørgensen et al., 2020). These insights are directly relevant to this study, which examines how intentional design across the virtual and in-person phases of a Hybrid Exchange

Programme shaped students' opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and intercultural connection.

### *Problem-Solving in Virtual Exchange*

Several VE scholars point to the role of problem-solving as an effective way to break down barriers between participants. The EVALUATE Group (2019), who studied VE as an educational tool for pre-service teachers find that VE is most effective in meeting intercultural learning objectives when students face challenges that require communication and teamwork to overcome (The EVALUATE Group, 2019). This is similar to a sentiment expressed by Van Hove (2020) who notes that studying abroad yields benefits such as confidence and adaptability and that this comes about after students are required to adapt to living in a new environment. With that in mind, VE should be designed to replicate this experience of adaptation (Van Hove, 2020). Studies on Virtual Internationalisation, and particularly on a subset of VE called COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) show that classes with project-based components can create the environment Van Hove describes, wherein students need to change their behaviours in order to work and communicate cross-culturally and achieve shared goals (Peraza & Furumura, 2022). Barbosa and Prado-Meza (2020) describe a COIL arrangement between students in Mexico and Portugal, wherein they collaborated on a marketing project together. The authors find that the students developed "teamwork, tolerance, negotiation, giving in, compromising...managing time, adapting to constraints and dealing with pressure." They also saw evidence of improvements in language abilities and students' capabilities in working across cultures (Barbosa & Prado-Meza, 2020). This research extends these finding through RQ 1 and RQ 3 by exploring the ways in which problem-solving unfolded in practice for the Brazilian and U.S. participants.

In a 2021 article, O’Dowd provides an overview of VE typologies. VE such as the one described in this study falls into the category of transnational VE, which he writes are “characterized by tasks which focus on global themes and issues and which require students to work together to solve a problem or complete a task together, rather than focusing explicitly on differences in cultural practices or perspectives” (p. 3). These task-based COIL projects are typically conducted in a mode known as “English as lingua franca” (p. 3). O’Dowd writes that, “Numerous reviews and surveys of current practice coincide that collaborative tasks such as these are much less common in the literature (Helm, 2016; Lamy & Goodfellow, 2010) and there are various reasons suggested as to why this is the case” (p. 3). Godwin-Jones (2019) notes that fitting these kinds of projects into academic schedules can be challenging, and students may push back if they perceive icebreaking activities as forced, rather than natural parts of the exchange experience.

### *Integrating Virtual Exchange into Comprehensive Internationalisation Strategies*

Another way in which VE can be utilised to maximise student learning is to make it a dimension of comprehensive internationalisation strategies. Comprehensive internationalisation refers to an institutional, strategic process that integrates global perspectives transversally across policy, partnerships, curriculum, pedagogy, and service, extending beyond individual physical mobility to shape institutional culture and decision-making (ACE, n.d.; Gacel-Ávila, 2012; Hudzik, 2011). Commander et al. write, “While the world pandemic has focused higher education on virtual activities, campuses must embrace comprehensive programmes to intentionally prepare global-ready graduates through multiple opportunities for international engagement” (2022, p. 64). O’Dowd (2023a) echoes this sentiment by describing how IaH and IoC can work in tandem with mobility toward the goal of comprehensive internationalisation,

and that “VE projects have the potential to complement and enhance both physical mobility programmes as well as domestic IaH strategies” (O’Dowd, 2023a, p. 64). As O’Dowd notes, the majority of students do not engage in study abroad activities and educators who strive to meet the goals of comprehensive internationalisation will have to find ways to bridge this gap (O’Dowd, 2023a). In addition to supporting student learning outcomes, VE contributes to other core components of comprehensive internationalisation as well. VE relies on sustained international partnerships and it requires the support of faculty and other instructors in order to function. The partnerships created strengthen institutional relationships and support globally oriented research. Through RQ 4, this dissertation will explore how VE complements mobility and also acts as IaH for the Brazilian students.

### *Reflective Activities and Guidance in Virtual Exchange*

As with other forms of intercultural learning, students engaging in VEs need adequate guidance and opportunities for reflection (O’Dowd (2023a). This is borne out in studies such as one conducted by the EVALUATE Group (2019) which found that support from trained facilitators enabled participants to see their VE exchange partners as “real people, not merely as anonymous names and avatars on a computer screen” (2019, p. 12). From the perspective of instructors, Weaver et al. (2022) found that instructors’ own lived experiences could play a key role in the capacity building of VE and that instructors’ reflective practices were significant in terms of their ability to facilitate effectively. Likewise, in blended mobility literature, reflection during and after both virtual and in-person phases is described as essential for transformative learning (Erbstein et al., 2022; Vesala-Varttala et al., 2024). RQ 1 addresses this by utilising students’ reflections to understand how their learning evolved across the phases of the programme.

As research on Hybrid Exchange Programmes continues to expand, it is important to understand their design and implementation and also their impact on students. Examining the learning outcomes associated with VE, short-term study abroad, and blended mobility provides valuable insights into what these programmes achieve in practice. Because HEPs combine VE and short-term study abroad within a single programme, examining learning outcomes from each of these components individually—as well as from blended programmes more broadly—provides insights into the potential opportunities HEPs offer within global learning. The following section reviews these outcomes to illuminate how such international education experiences contribute to students’ global learning and development.

### **Maximising Learning Outcomes for Short-Term Study Abroad Programme Design**

Many studies have described practices that resulted in student growth and development in study abroad (e.g. Houser et al., 2011; Vande Berg et al., 2009; Whatley et al., 2021). This subsection summarises how various facets of programme design can contribute to that growth. It provides an overview on course selection, programme type, the role of faculty, living arrangements, and concludes with a discussion of programme “depth.”

#### ***Course Selection for Short-Term Study Abroad***

One of the primary ways programme design influences student learning is through course selection, which shapes students’ exposure to local perspectives and academic integration. Vande Berg et al. (2009) noted an increase in Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) scores among study abroad students who took courses alongside local students. In addition, among U.S. students who limited their interactions with other U.S. students while abroad, there was a greater increase in pre/post IDI scores, suggestive of the value of their greater immersion (Vande Berg et al., 2009, p. 24). Whatley and colleagues (2021) find that taking courses in English, as well as

living in an English-speaking country, can adversely affect specific areas of global perspective development, such as cognitive knowledge and the ability to interact socially on an interpersonal level. However, they find that doing so does not affect the cognitive aspect of knowledge acquisition (Whatley et al., 2021). This suggests that students' exposure to language in the classroom and language used by locals are significant factors that influence the depth of intercultural learning during study abroad programmes.

### *Programme Type for Short-Term Study Abroad*

While course selection determines academic exposure, the type of programme also influences students' opportunities for cultural immersion and interaction. According to Whatley et al. (2021), the location of the programme plays a role. They find that for students participating in programmes situated on an island campus (where students remain with peers from their home institution), there were decreased scores in cognitive knowing, as measured by the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI), an instrument used to explore cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimension (Whatley et al., 2021). Programmes that run on a host-institution campus are linked with a decrease in both intrapersonal identity and interpersonal social interaction (Whatley et al., 2021). However, some advantages to island and host-institution-run programmes have been identified, particularly regarding student access to study abroad. Goldstein (2015) identifies several ways in which such programmes increase access. These include providing opportunities to students with limited language skills; courses that are aligned with students' curricular needs and degree requirements; programme start and end dates that align with the students' academic calendar; coursework tailored to the student population; opportunities for explorations of students' own cultural assumptions through comparison with the host context; and ease of transfer of financial aid and payments; and opportunities for faculty

development (Goldstein, 2015, p. 1). Significantly, she also finds that students who prefer the island model differ in many ways—for instance, they show less interest in language learning, are less adventurousness, and are more likely to be White—making it hard to determine whether it is the model that leads to impacts in scores or the selection of said model by a particular group of students.

Study abroad experiences that include high impact practices like internships and being provided with opportunities for reflection contribute positively to the development of global perspectives (Whatley et al., 2021). Conversely, programmes that involve a larger population of students travelling together correspond with a negative impact on global perspective development, as does taking coursework in English (Whatley et al., 2021). Whatley and colleagues find that each additional participant in a programme lowers student scores in cognitive knowing, intrapersonal affect, and interpersonal social interaction (2021). These findings suggest that programme settings, structure, and size, and the overall community are crucial areas of impact for short-term study abroad experiences.

### ***Role of Faculty for Short-Term Study Abroad***

Faculty engagement is another important factor in enhancing learning outcomes on short-term study abroad programmes. Vande Berg and colleagues (2009) find that students who frequently engage with a mentor for intercultural learning showed gains on their IDI scores (p. 21). Whatley and colleagues find that students who travel with faculty from their home institutions experience an increase in their cognitive knowing scores (Whatley et al., 2021). Houser and colleagues (2011) describe such relationships as continuing after students return to campus and potentially leading to positive gains in academic achievement as measured through final exam scores (Houser et al., 2011). These studies show the significant role that faculty play

on short-term programmes, in part due to the level of engagement they have with students on such programmes.

### ***Living Arrangements for Short-Term Study Abroad***

The living arrangements that characterise short-term study abroad programmes can influence learning outcomes as well. Vande Berg and colleagues (2009) find that students who chose study environments that were “somewhat dissimilar” or “dissimilar” from their home culture experienced increased IDI scores (p. 22). Additionally, students who lived with other students—regardless of their country of origin—showed increased IDI scores compared to those staying with host families (Vande Berg et al., 2009, p. 23). An important caveat is that those students who had close relationships with their host families showed greater increases than those who spent less time with their host families (p. 23). Whatley and colleagues (2021) report that living with a host family correlates with decreases in cognitive knowledge and interpersonal skills. The nuances of these findings may indicate that living with host families can offer opportunities for deeper cultural immersion, but doing so may also present challenges to cognitive and interpersonal development for some students.

### ***Programme “Depth” for Short-Term Study Abroad***

These factors—course selection, programme type, faculty role, and living arrangements—each contribute to the overall depth of students’ experiences, which is explored in the following section. DeLoach and colleagues describe “depth” as “focused and reflective interaction with the destination culture” (DeLoach et al., 2021, p. 100). Short-term study abroad programmes vary in terms of the kinds of “deep” experiences they offer. Such experiences can include being located in less common destinations, not being isolated on an island programme, or providing opportunities for non-native language exposure. The duration of a programme does not

necessarily correlate with learning outcomes (DeLoach et al., 2021). This aligns with findings by Paige et al. (2009; 2010), that the “intensity” of the experience matters. Goldstein’s systematic review of short-term study abroad intercultural outcomes (2022) emphasises the need for targeted interventions to foster intercultural learning. These should occur before, during, and after study abroad to achieve the greatest impact.

Programme size is another factor. As previously discussed, the size of the group of participants impacts the experience with larger groups making it harder for students to achieve measurable intercultural gains (Whatley et al., 2021). Finally, students who travelled within the country that they studied in had positive increases in the realms of “cognitive knowing” and “social responsibility” (Whatley et al., 2021, p. 11). This focus on “depth” is particularly relevant to this study as it examines how learning can be maximised within a programme that includes minimal face-to-face interaction and little-to-no time spent abroad. With this conceptual foundation established, the next section turns to scholarship on Hybrid Exchange Programmes and related models to examine how these frameworks are operationalised in practice and how they relate to both student learning outcomes and programme design.

Within the literature on VE and short-term study abroad, certain design features stand out as being catalysts for student learning. Notably, these features are not tied to duration or modality, but to the pedagogical structure. In VE contexts, project-based learning encourages sustained collaboration and requires students to reflect on the ways they communicate across cultural, linguistic, and interpersonal differences (O’Dowd, 2021; Peraza & Furumura, 2022; Ndubuisi et al., 2022). Practices that contribute to “depth” in short-term study abroad mirror these findings. Active engagement with the host cultures, collaborative work with locals, and facilitated reflections are all contributors (DeLoach et al., 2021; Vande Berg et al., 2009;

Nguyen, 2017). Shared design principles begin to emerge when comparing VE literature with that on short-term study abroad; namely, that student learning is enhanced when students are active collaborators who are challenged through authentic tasks and who are supported through guided reflection. The commonalities seen within these two bodies of literature suggest that sustained collaboration, facilitated reflection, and engagement with locals are all key mechanisms that support global learning. Together, these bodies of literature provide a foundation for exploring the potential for Hybrid Exchange Programmes, which intentionally sequences these practices.

### **Literature on Programmes that Blend VE and Short-Term Study Abroad**

This section reviews existing scholarship on programmes that blend VE and study abroad. It begins with a pedagogical form referred to as Pre-Mobility Virtual Exchange which can be seen as a precursor to Hybrid Exchange Programmes (Batardière et al., 2019; Giralt & Murray, 2019; Griggio & Pittarello, 2021; Purg et al., 2018). It then reviews cases that are more similar to the Hybrid Exchange Programme described in this study, which are commonly referred to as “blended mobility” (e.g. Borrelli et al., 2024; Lopes et al., 2024; O’Dowd & Werner, 2024; Vesala-Varttala et al., 2024). The body of literature on programmes that blend VE with mobility is not yet sufficiently extensive, and as such, I draw on literature from the two components that make up HEPs: study abroad (primarily short-term) and VE. Research from study abroad, VE, and HEPs are incorporated to support my investigation into the areas of learning outcomes, pedagogical interventions, accessibility, and equity.

### **Pre-Mobility Virtual Exchange**

Pre-Mobility Virtual Exchanges are related to HEPs because they encompass VE and study abroad. In general, these exchanges are not part of a unified learning experience, and in

some cases, the students are not even collaborating with students from the country they study abroad in (Batardière et al., 2019; Giralt & Murray, 2019; Griggio & Pittarello, 2021; O’Dowd, 2023a; Purg et al., 2018). While related to Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs) in combining virtual and physical components, pre-mobility VEs are typically not structured as a unified pedagogical experience and often lack direct integration between the online and in-person phases. As O’Dowd (2023a) summarises, pre-mobility VE aims “to prepare students for their study abroad period by bringing them into formal contact with students from the partner university, or when this isn’t possible, from the country where the university is located” (p. 91). These programmes seek to build students’ cultural awareness and prepare them for the practicalities of studying in another country.

### *VE as Preparation*

Across the literature, pre-mobility VE is highlighted for its capacity to enhance students’ readiness for mobility. For example, Batardière and colleagues (2019) report on a pre-mobility VE with undergraduate foreign language students across Europe. This four-to-eight-week VE improved students’ intercultural awareness, digital literacy, and linguistic competence, which aligned with the programme’s aims. Similarly, Griggio and Pittarello (2021) describe an eTandem initiative at the University of Padova in which host and visiting students engaged in VE prior to the arrival of the visiting students (Batardière et al., 2019; Griggio & Pittarello, 2021). Such programmes aim to build confidence and reduce anxiety by fostering early exposure to the target language and cultural context (O’Dowd, 2023a).

### *Disconnection from Mobility Experience*

Despite these benefits, existing models often remain disconnected from students’ subsequent study abroad period. For instance, Batardière et al. (2019) did not explore whether

VE participation influenced students' experiences while abroad, highlighting a gap in understanding the longitudinal impact of such interventions. Likewise, Griggio and Pittarello (2021) note that while their eTandem programme prepared students linguistically, there were no formal activities that connected the VE collaborators once the students arrived on campus. This lack of integrated programming distinguishes pre-mobility VE from HEPs, where online and in-person components are unified.

### ***Pedagogical Innovation and Challenges***

Literature on Pre-Mobility Virtual Exchange (PMVE) also illustrates efforts made to develop innovative pedagogical design. Giralt and Murray (2019), describe an Irish-Spanish telecollaboration with the aim of lowering student attrition in such programmes. They proposed gamification to enhance student engagement. Purg et al. (2018) describe a blended learning programme for art and media education master's students involving online preparation, an intensive international workshop, and post-mobility online presentations. Although this model integrated multiple learning modalities and was more longitudinal in design, it was not clear from the publication whether online preparation included collaborative exchanges with students or mentors from the destination country.

### ***Key Insights on Pre-Mobility Virtual Exchange***

These examples illustrate that while Pre-Mobility Virtual Exchange enhances linguistic and intercultural preparation, its design often positions it as a precursor to physical mobility rather than as an integrated part of a cohesive global learning experience. Designing programmes that better integrate VE and mobility into a unified pedagogical framework—such as in HEPs—may strengthen learning outcomes and foster more inclusive global engagement opportunities, an issue this dissertation explores through RQ 2 and in dialogue with experiential learning theory.

### Hybrid Exchange Programmes

There are few studies on Hybrid Exchange Programmes, although this field is rapidly growing, with several new publications between 2022 to the present. Prior to these publications, some scholars mentioned the possibility or existence of such programmes. These publications describe HEPs in terms of their potential rather than with any accompanying case study or description of an actual programme. These include a recent UNESCO report on VE (Sabzalieva et al., 2022), a European Parliament report on VE and physical mobility (Buiscool & Hudepohl, 2020); a position paper by Helm and O’Dowd (2020); chapters by O’Dowd (2016), and de Wit (2016), and a recent monograph by O’Dowd (2023a). These sources have generally been enthusiastic about the potential for blending VE and study abroad. Helm and O’Dowd summarise this sentiment well, writing that such programmes can be used as “preparation for physical mobility, as a complement to physical mobility in blended mobility initiatives and as an inclusive, international learning opportunity for students and staff who may not be able to or want to have a physical or blended mobility” (2020, p. 3).

While “blended mobility” is the prevalent term in policy and scholarship, in this dissertation I use the term “Hybrid Exchange Programme” (HEP) to reflect the specific design of my study, where some students are mobile and others are not, but all engage in meaningful exchange online and in person in Brazil. Blended mobility programmes such as HEPs have gained traction due to both the increased interest in Virtual Internationalisation post-Covid-19 pandemic and the availability of funding for the European Union Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) (O’Dowd & Werner, 2024). As a result, research on programmes involving *European* partnerships has proliferated in recent years (Batardière et al., 2019; Borrelli et al., 2024; Carthy, 2022; Lopes et al., 2024; O’Dowd & Werner, 2024; Perfözl and López-Varela, 2022; Purg et al.,

2018; Sedláčková, 2023; & Vesala-Varttala et al., 2024) and additional studies include at least one European partner (Duś-Ilnicka et al., 2024; Slotkin et al., 2012). Meanwhile, few case studies have been published that involve partnerships outside of Europe. To date, these include Erbstein et al., 2022 (discussing the U.S. and Nepal), Ghareb and Mohammed, 2019 (Kurdistan and Iraq), Matikainen and Cote, 2023 (Australia and Japan), and Zheng and colleagues, 2022 (U.S. and China). Just one programme has included Brazilian students (Duś-Ilnicka et al., 2024). The geographic concentration of scholarship in Europe is not surprising, due to the availability of funding for Blended Intensive Programmes (Duś-Ilnicka et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this study seeks to address a gap in the literature by describing a partnership outside of Europe, and in particular, one that involves a Brazilian partner.

Teams and project-based learning are important in both VE and blended programmes (Peraza & Furumura, 2022). Recent scholarship by Erbstein et al. (2022) and Vesala-Varttala et al. (2024) emphasise the ways in which problem-solving can be used to facilitate student collaboration and connection. Erbstein et al. emphasise the importance of centring a decolonial perspective into project design to foster equitable knowledge production, which was important in the cross-cultural teamwork their students were doing as part of a Nepal-U.S. blended programme.

Within the blended mobility context, research has shown that blending the two modalities can enhance intercultural communication skills and cultural sensitivity (Zheng et al., 2022). For example, Zheng et al. gathered data on a VE between U.S. and Chinese business students preceding short-term study abroad in China, finding significant gains in U.S. students' intercultural competence using the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale. Notably, while their study

focused on VE impacts alone, it suggests the potential of VE to prime students for richer in-country learning.

While this section has established the emerging interest in and geographic overview of HEPs, it is essential to understand what students gain as participants in these experiences. Exploring the variety of learning outcomes associated with VE, short-term study abroad, and blended mobility provides insights into the ways in which such programmes can impact student learning, which this dissertation explores through RQ 1. The following section reviews these outcomes to illustrate how different programme designs contribute to students' global learning and overall development.

### **Hybrid Exchange Programmes through an Equity Lens**

This section assesses HEPs from an equity perspective. It begins by outlining the necessity for an equity framing in this study. Next, it interrogates deficit narratives around students and around programme types. It goes on to examine equity in Global South/Global North partnerships with a focus on technological equity and access considerations and considers how these experiences can either perpetuate or challenge traditional power dynamics in international education.

Approaching HEPs through an equity lens is somewhat unique since this approach is not commonly utilised within studies of higher education internationalisation. In a survey of 151 internationalisation articles, Mittelmeier and Yang (2022) found that “only 3.31% framed the research through power and privilege, and 2.65% through dominance.” (Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022, p. 47). In the same volume, Mittelmeier and colleagues (2024) argue that the researchers need to take responsibility for examining the systemic disparities rather than burdening students with taking this on at an individual level. Utilising an equity lens to examine HEPs is essential

because arguments in favour of utilising them often emphasise equity. Opportunities such as HEPs are seen as a means to expand access to international education for underrepresented students and to create reciprocal opportunities for participants on both sides of exchange programmes, as examined through a Critical Internationalisation lens in RQ 4. The next two subsections explore questions of access and equity through counter-deficit lenses.

### **Moving Beyond Student Deficit Narratives in Global Education**

HEPs are often positioned as expanding access, as are their component parts: VE and short-term study abroad. Critiques of such programmes sometimes rely on deficit narratives which portray these programmes as lesser than semester or year-long study abroad experiences. Research that adopts a counter-deficit perspective shows that students labelled as “non-traditional” seek out and succeed in participating in a wide variety of international education opportunities (Malveaux & Raby, 2019; Wood, 2023a; Wood, 2023b). Malveaux and Raby (2019) find that such students do not lack ability or interest, but that structural barriers and institutional preconceptions limit their access. Structural limitations (such as lack of staffing in global offices) and preconceptions held by university decision makers (for instance, the idea that global education is “extra”) can potentially be barriers to participation (Malveaux and Raby, 2019). Therefore, it is essential for educators to approach programme design and implementation with an equity mindset rather than a deficit mindset. Such a mindset would shift from asking, “does this programme-type resemble long-term mobility?” to instead asking, “how effectively does this program-type support students’ global learning while meeting their needs in ways that are compatible with their life circumstances and goals?” The next subsection delves deeper into deficit narratives related to programme type.

### **Moving Beyond Programme-Type Deficit Narratives in Global Education**

In addition to deficit narratives about students, the component parts of HEPs (VE and short-term study abroad) are often discussed in terms of their deficiencies from longer-term study abroad which reinforces a hierarchy of values within international education rather than assessing the programmes on their pedagogical merits and potential outcomes for students. VE and short-term study abroad are often discussed in terms of their deficiencies from semester- or year-long study abroad. In the realm of short-term study abroad, Chiocca (2021) writes:

Short-term programs have been under scrutiny in the past decade, as scholars question whether growth (linguistic and intercultural) can be achieved in short stays abroad (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Dwyer, 2004), with a tacit assumption that limited duration is synonymous with superficiality (p. 36).

Relatedly, Goldstein (2022) notes that short-term programmes have faced increasing scrutiny over the past decade, with scholars questioning whether such experiences can foster linguistic or intercultural development. Likewise, in the VE realm, Helm and Guth (2022) summarise this, writing that VE has had to “‘prove itself,’ unlike physical mobility, because many educators and funding agencies have questioned the extent to which it is possible to build meaningful relationships and have significant intercultural experiences online” (p. 269). This critique often rests on the stereotype that shorter durations equate to superficial learning (Coker et al., 2018; Dwyer, 2004; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2009). This dissertation seeks to interrogate these critiques while recognising that hybrid models may open alternative pathways for global learning that are not dependent on time spent abroad.

### **Equity Within a Global South/Global North Partnership**

In this dissertation, the equity lens is important not only because of the potential power imbalances at play in any short-term study abroad or VE, but also because of the global positioning of the two partners, with one in the Global North and one in the Global South. This subsection explores structural inequities in such partnerships.

Using the metric of U.S. dollar Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) reported by the International Monetary Fund, Brazil's average annual income is \$20,730 per person compared to \$83,086 in the United States (International Monetary Fund, 2024). Likewise, as stated previously in this text, the flows of students between the countries are uneven. In the 2022–2023 academic year, 1,547 U.S. students studied abroad in Brazil, accounting for less than one per cent of the total 280,716 U.S. students who participated in study abroad programmes (Institute of International Education, 2024). By comparison, 16,877 Brazilian students studied in the United States during the same period, making the U.S. the leading destination for Brazilian students (IIE Open Doors, 2024). These figures underscore a continuing imbalance in mobility flows between the two countries, with significantly more Brazilian students pursuing education in the U.S. than U.S. students choosing Brazil as a study destination. The official languages used by the two countries play a role in this imbalance as well. Brazilians are world leaders in publication productivity, but the international reach and citation of work produced by Brazil-based scholars is not currently reflective of their output (McManus & Nobre, 2017).

While structural and operational challenges can affect any international partnership, they may be particularly exacerbated in Global-South/Global-North collaborations due to differences in institutional resources and academic systems. In the context of Hybrid Exchange Programmes, much of the existing scholarship comes from European contexts, but identifying these challenges

is still valuable since similar dynamics can affect partnerships in South-North partnerships. Perfözl and López-Varela (2022) identify barriers to blended mobility programmes within Europe. These include incompatible degree requirements, divergent academic calendars, and administrative procedures that can complicate programme delivery. Similarly, O’Dowd and Werner’s (2024) survey of Blended Intensive Programmes in Europe finds that administrative problems accounted for 30% of reported issues, followed by financial constraints (26%), difficulties meeting enrolment targets (14%), and mismatches in academic calendars (8%). Erbstein et al. (2022) argue that decolonisation must be central to all aspects of blended mobility, from conceptual frameworks to implementation. Without this, programmes risk reproducing hierarchical knowledge structures. Operational misalignments can exacerbate existing inequities, and addressing such structural challenges is therefore critical to fostering equitable and sustainable programmes.

Language dynamics can create further equity issues in global education programming. For one, English can become a “prerequisite for participation” (Helm & Guth, 2022, p. 275). Language can also lead to anxiety about communication, particularly in a video conferencing setting (O’Dowd, 2023a). Aldrich and Whatley (2024) indicate that such encounters may contribute to Foreign Language Anxiety and that such encounters can entrench rather than challenge the colonial underpinnings of educational access.

O’Dowd (2023b) cautions that both VE and blended mobility programmes, while intended to foster intercultural connection, can unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities, neo-colonial practices, and cultural dominance, or perpetuate stereotypes about other cultures and nations. He explains that these programmes often default to English as lingua franca and frequently position Global North instructors as trainers for Global South partners (2023b, see

also DeWinter & Klamer, 2021; Sick & Hou, 2023). These studies illustrate how equity challenges in blended or virtual programmes are multifaceted and can include issues of financial resources, language, and educational hegemony. By focusing on a Brazil-U.S. partnership, this dissertation contributes knowledge from outside the European realm. The next section examines another example of equity, that of technological equity, particularly in relation to Virtual Internationalisation.

### **Technological Equity**

Technological access remains a significant challenge for scholars and practitioners who strive to make virtual exchanges equitable and accessible (Aldrich & Whatley, 2024; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Helm & Guth, 2022; Huang, 2022; O’Dowd & Beaven, 2021). Unequal digital access can limit participation, especially in Global South contexts (Helm & Guth, 2022). Aldrich and Whatley note that access to electricity and high-speed internet are not available to all and that they can be “contingent on government, institutions, and policies that enable such access” (p. 64). Technology must also be maintained through updates, renewals, and subscriptions (pp. 61–62). These challenges have resulted in the underrepresentation of VE participants from Global South countries (Alami et al., 2022). These disparities can easily be glossed over by those who have limited experience dealing with such issues, yet they must be included as part of the preparatory process for creating the VE or HEP.

### **HEPs as Expanding Access**

This section explores the ways in which HEPs can expand access to international education. It considers flexibility, scalability, accessibility for students with disabilities, and pathways for future engagement. The barriers to traditional mobility are well-documented and can include finances, family and work obligations, visa issues, curricular alignment, and health

(Aldrich & Whatley, 2024; Malerich, 2022; O’Dowd, 2023a). Like short-term study abroad, VE has been heralded as a programme model with the potential to help students overcome some of these obstacles. The following subsections explore the potential for VEs to overcome some of these barriers.

### *Flexibility*

VEs are often perceived as being more accessible than traditional mobility. Indeed, they may put global learning in reach of students who cannot study abroad due to work or family obligations (Woicolesco et al., 2022). VE has the clear potential to expand the pool of participants who engage in global learning (Aldrich & Whatley, 2024). De Wit (2013) notes that Virtual Internationalisation shifts the frame of reference toward students who do not study abroad – students who make up the vast majority of university populations worldwide. Through Virtual Internationalisation, it becomes “possible for non-mobile students to develop an international dimension to their teaching and learning” (np). The cost is often considerably less than travelling abroad, thereby removing some financial barriers (De Wit, 2016). Students are not hampered by visa or immigration issues, although it should be noted that they could be subject to state-operated firewalls, surveillance, outdated internet infrastructure, or other restrictions. Caution should be used to ensure that such framing does not position non-mobile students as a homogenous group. In reality, many students with work, family, and financial obligations do study abroad when such programmes are designed to accommodate their realities (Malveaux & Raby, 2019; Wood, 2023a; Wood, 2023b). Thus, while virtual interventions can broaden access (Stallivieri et al., 2022), they are not the only viable pathway for the students de Wit describes.

In O'Dowd's (2023a) discussion of flexibility as an attribute of blended programmes he describes several potential benefits. These include shorter duration which broadens the pool of students who can participate, flexibility of meeting times, development of online literacy skills, and an intensive immersion period (p. 20). By reducing physical travel, blended mobility allows participation by students with financial, work, family, or health constraints (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024).

In reference to blended mobility, O'Dowd (2023a) cites a recent report that predicts that blended mobility programmes will be more attractive than traditional mobility programmes due to the short stays required, particularly in the case of EU-sponsored programmes (O'Dowd, 2023a). This is reflected in a U.S. context as well, where one-third of study abroad participants study abroad for a semester or longer and two-thirds study abroad for a semester or less (IIE Open Doors, 2023). While the flexibility of VE and Hybrid Exchange Programmes can remove barriers to participation, this study questions whether flexibility alone can guarantee equitable outcomes, particularly when virtual components remain disconnected from students' degree pathways or when issues related to technology access or language come into play.

### ***Scalability***

In considering the two components of the HEP—the VE and the short-term study abroad—one way in which HEPs can be considered more equitable is in terms of their scalability (Aldrich & Whatley, 2024). Aldrich and Whatley note that study abroad programmes have space constraints in terms of the number of students who can participate (2024). They are also limited in terms of institutional financial support (Aldrich & Whatley, 2024). The opportunity to provide such programmes to a larger number of students points to the possibility of VE programmes having a greater aggregate impact than other internationalisation opportunities such as study

abroad (Aldrich & Whatley, 2024). In the Hybrid Exchange Programme studied in this dissertation, space constraints remained a barrier since the in-person company visits and other components of the itinerary had limited room and thus required capping the number of students.

### *Accessibility for Students with Disabilities*

VE and short-term study abroad have the potential to be more inclusive of students with disabilities for whom extended travel may pose barriers. As such, practitioners who design such programmes have the opportunity to build inclusivity and access into the programme design in such a way to be accessible to a wider array of students. An organisation called Mobility International USA (MIUSA) offers ideas to support the implementation of inclusive VE programmes, including embedding captions, assuring screen reader compatibility and allowing for keyboard navigation (MIUSA, 2024a). Accessibility is often touted as a benefit of short-term study abroad because programmes of varying duration provide multiple entry points for participation aligned with individual needs and goals.

Mobility International USA highlights ways that these programmes can be more inclusive to students with disabilities if programme creators design them with intentionality. Such programmes have the potential to be developed in collaboration with students and disability services staff. They can be designed with activities that are inclusive to all participants and can encourage community-building among participants through the pre-departure process. They can also allow for participants to develop close ties to faculty leaders so that emergency protocols and contingency plans are well designed and articulated (MIUSA, 2024b). It is important to note that neither VE nor short-term study abroad are inherently inclusive to students with disabilities. Programmes need to be designed with inclusivity in mind in order to successfully achieve these outcomes.

### *Pathway To Future Engagement*

Some scholarship on VE discusses the subsequent impact it will have on students who study abroad. While no studies have been conducted on HEPs specifically, it is possible that the impact of the VE that takes place as part of the HEP would have a similar effect. Lee and colleagues (2022) find that VE participation makes it twice as likely that a student will subsequently study abroad. Kinginger (2016) describes how VE “might contribute to the success of student sojourns abroad” (p. 1). Helm and van der Velden (2020) also find that VE increased students’ interest in subsequent study abroad. Mapp (2007) demonstrates that short-term study abroad participants were more likely to express an interest in future travel. Kato and Suzuki (2019) find that Japanese students who were randomly assigned to study abroad were more likely to participate in subsequent study abroad opportunities, and Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) find that short-term study abroad students were more likely to go onto travel or study abroad. Although HEPs include travel components for some participants, it remains unclear whether these programmes inspire future study abroad among host-country students who engage virtually, highlighting an area for further research.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter situates Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs) within the broader literature on internationalisation and global learning. It discusses ways in which internationalisation frameworks including Internationalisation at Home (IaH), Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC), Virtual Internationalisation (VI), and Critical Internationalisation are treated as discrete entities in the literature yet must be considered in relation to each other to capture the breadth of Hybrid Exchange Programmes. Research on VE and short-term study abroad indicates that both can support meaningful student development across personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic,

and professional domains. However, the extent of this development is frequently shaped by programme design, instructor facilitation, institutional support, and student agency. While many studies have explored VE and mobility as separate modalities, limited research exists on integrated formats, such as Hybrid Exchange Programmes, Blended Intensive Programmes, or Pre-Mobility Virtual Exchange, that intentionally combine both. Moreover, the literature has largely focused on programmes involving Global North institutions, with less attention given to experiences of students from the Global South.

This study responds to those gaps by exploring a Hybrid Exchange Programme (HEP) connecting students in Brazil and the United States through a blended model of virtual and short-term in-person learning. It offers insight into how HEPs can shape student learning while also interrogating the institutional and structural factors that influence access and engagement. It builds on previous research by investigating global learning outcomes while also questioning assumptions such as the presumed inclusivity of IaH and VE, or the perceived deficit of short-term mobility. The following chapter introduces the theoretical frameworks that guide the study's analysis, including experiential learning, transformative learning theory, the concept of belonging, Critical Internationalisation, and Critical Virtual Exchange.

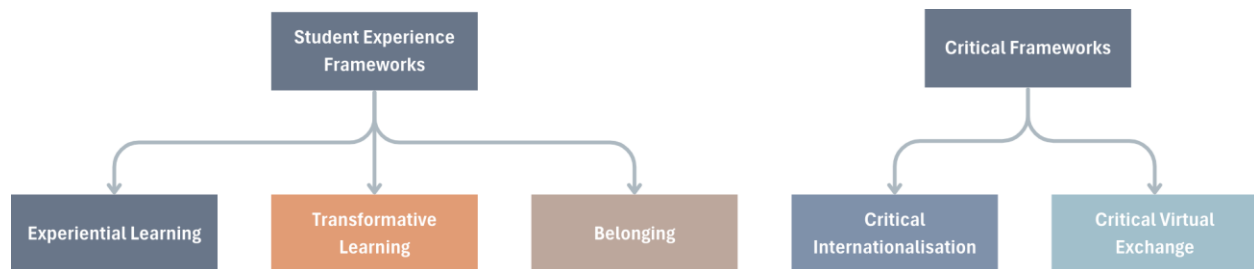


CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To arrive at a more nuanced understanding of how students experience Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs), the research questions cover several different areas and therefore require multiple theoretical underpinnings. In this study, I describe HEPs as being built on both technologically mediated exchange and in-person exchange in an academic context. Through these experiences, students construct meaning as individuals and collectively, all while interacting with people from different national and linguistic backgrounds. Figure 2 shows the two overarching frameworks support this research, which I refer to as student experience frameworks and critical frameworks.

**Figure 2**

*Theoretical Frameworks*



Within student experience frameworks, I explore experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1938/1997; Kolb, 1984; Kolb, 2015), transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1995; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow, 2006) and the concept of belonging (Leask, 2009; Mittelmeier, 2025; Yao, 2015), as visualised in Table 1. Within critical frameworks, I use Critical Internationalisation (Cai & Leask, 2024; Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; da Silva et al., 2023; Freire, 1970; Jordão & Mandarino Silva, 2023; Martinez et al., 2023; Mittelmeier, 2024; Stein, 2021; Yao, 2015) and Critical Virtual Exchange (Helm, 2024; Hinck et

al., 2024; O’Dowd, 2023b; Sicka & Atajanova; 2024; Whatley et al., 2022) as lenses to guide data generation and interpretation. Table 2 provides a visual overview of the scope of this framework, showing the two overarching frameworks: student experience frameworks and critical frameworks. Beneath the student experience framework are experiential learning theory and Connection and Belonging. Underneath Critical Frameworks are Critical Internationalisation and Critical Virtual Exchange (Sicka & Atajanova, 2024).

**Table 1**

*Frameworks Related to Students’ Experiences*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Theoretical Basis</b>
<b>RQ 1:</b> How do students’ perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme?	<b>Experiential learning theory</b> (Dewey, 1938/1997; Kolb, 1984; Kolb, 2015) <b>Transformative learning theory</b> (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1995; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow, 2006)
<b>RQ 3:</b> How does the programme design support student belonging, and in what ways do students exercise agency in creating their own connections?	<b>Concepts of belonging</b> (Leask, 2009; Mittelmeier, 2025; Yao, 2015)

**Table 2**

*Critical Frameworks*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Theoretical Basis</b>
<b>RQ 2:</b> What challenges do students encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context?	<b>Critical Virtual Exchange</b> (Helm, 2024; Hinck et al., 2024; O’Dowd, 2023b; Sicka & Atajanova, 2024; Whatley et al., 2022)
<b>RQ 4:</b> How does participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes differentially benefit U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by U.S. and Brazilian students?	<b>Critical Internationalisation</b> (Cai & Leask, 2024; Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; da Silva et al., 2023; De Wit & Jones, 2022; Freire, 1970; Jordão & Mandarin Silva, 2023; Martinez et al., 2023; Mittelmeier, 2024; Stein, 2021; Yao, 2015)

While there is inherent overlap in terms of the way the theories can support the research questions, certain theories are more strongly connected to certain research questions.

Experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1938/1997; Kolb, 1984; Kolb, 2015) and transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1995; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow, 2006) support RQ 1. These theories focus on learning through experience, reflection, and social interaction which are central components of the Hybrid Exchange Programme.

Theories related to the concepts of belonging (Leask, 2009; Mittelmeier, 2025; Yao, 2015) undergird RQ 3. These are utilised to explore social connections that students create as participants in the programme. Critical frameworks support RQ 2 and RQ 4. Specifically, Critical Virtual Exchange (Helm, 2024; Hinck et al., 2024; O’Dowd, 2023b; Sicka & Atajanova, 2024; Whatley et al., 2022) supports RQ 2 in shedding light on the complexities of digital communication in a cross-cultural context. Critical Internationalisation (Cai & Leask, 2024; Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; da Silva et al., 2023; Freire, 1970; Jordão & Mandarino Silva, 2023; Martinez et al., 2023; Mittelmeier, 2024; Stein, 2021; Yao, 2015) explores how socio-economic contexts and power dynamics shape students’ experiences on these programmes.

I will begin with student experience frameworks as they are particularly relevant for RQ 1. These frameworks allow for an exploration of how students construct knowledge through experience and reflection across virtual and in-person phases. They are also relevant for RQ 3, as they provide tools to understand how students build meaningful relationships within the programme design. The second subsection on critical frameworks begins with an overview of Critical Internationalisation (Cai & Leask, 2024; Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; da Silva et al., 2023; Freire, 1970; Jordão & Mandarino Silva, 2023; Martinez et al., 2023; Mittelmeier, 2024; Stein,

2021; Yao, 2015) and I then explore Critical Virtual Exchange (Helm, 2024; Hinck et al., 2024; O'Dowd, 2023b; Sicka & Atajanova, 2024; Whatley et al., 2022). These critical frameworks support RQs 2 and 4 by enabling analysis of how power, privilege, and structural inequalities influence students' experiences in technologically mediated and cross-cultural learning contexts. They guide my exploration of the ways in which the programme differentially benefits U.S. and Brazilian students.

### **Frameworks Related to Students' Experiences**

Theories related to students' experiences form an integral part of the theoretical framework for this study. As noted, these theories relate to the following RQs:

- RQ 1: How do students' perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme?
- RQ 3: How does the programme design support student belonging, and in what ways do students exercise agency in creating their own connections?

### **Experiential Learning Theory**

Experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1938/1997; Kolb, 1984; Kolb, 2015) focuses on learning through experience, reflection, and social interaction which are central components of the Hybrid Exchange Programme. Experiential learning is built on Dewey's work in human development which emphasises learning as a process (1938/1997). Kolb's experiential learning theory also relies on a social constructivist framework (Dewey, 1938/1997, Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978). Kolb (2015) describes the historical context for constructivism, noting that Piaget and Vygostky's texts are foundational in this area. (Kolb, 2015). For Vygotsky, movement from one pedagogical stage to the next can be facilitated by

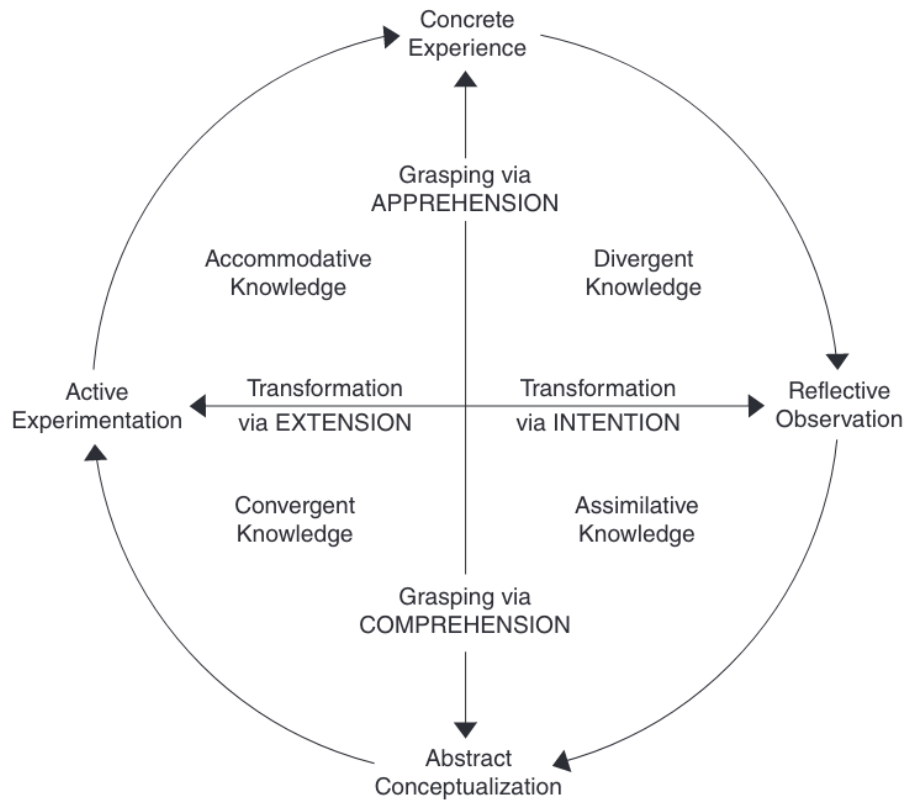
someone with a deeper understanding of the topic at hand (Kolb, 2015). This can be accomplished through “scaffolding.” Kolb writes, “In scaffolding the educator tailors the learning process to the individual needs and developmental level of the learner. Scaffolding provides the structure and support necessary to progressively build knowledge” (Kolb, 2015, p. 27). This can be applied to the Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEP) wherein the various components of intercultural preparation, virtual exchange, and subsequent in-person interaction can be seen as the sequential preparatory steps Kolb refer to as scaffolds.

Experiential learning utilises reflection as a central component. Cranton (2016) notes that Dewey’s call for ongoing and attentive engagement with learning aligns closely with contemporary calls from practitioners for critical reflection (p. 115). Passarelli & Kolb (2015) explore experiential learning theory in an education abroad context, explaining how “learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes” (p. 2). They write that being in another cultural environment can prompt students “to make sense of the novelty and ambiguity with which they are regularly confronted” (p. 138). Based on these experiences, students “adopt new ways of thinking, acting, and relating to the world” (p. 138). In this way, the theory relates well to RQ 1 which explores students’ perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth as it evolves over time.

Reflection likewise plays a role in the dissertation longitudinal surveys, in the retrospective interviews, and in the photo elicitation employed in the data collection for this research. Figure 3 shows Kolb’s experiential learning theory presents learning as an active, recursive process that occurs through the interplay of action and reflection, as well as experience and abstraction (Kolb, 2015, pp. 50–51).

**Figure 3**

*Structural Dimensions Underlying the Process of Experiential Learning and the Resulting Basic Knowledge Forms (Kolb, 2015, p. 68)*



Kolb (2015) describes “the four modes of the learning process,” which he defines as “concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation” (p. 100).

***Stretch Activities***

The “stretch intervention” (McCauley & Yost, 2021) is another concept that this study connects to experiential learning theory and utilises to explore how participants step outside their comfort zone. Russo-Netzer and Cohen (2023) define “stretch interventions” as

a novel volitional intervention that encourages people to engage in activities ‘outside their comfort zone’ [that] prompts people to engage in activities that they

would normally be reluctant to do, in effect stretching themselves beyond their normal comfort zone (p. 395).

McCauley and Yost (2021) write that stretch activities can lead to growth when success in the activity requires knowledge, skills, or perspectives that extend beyond those the individual already possesses. Stretch interventions connect to experiential learning theory in that it allows participants to reflect on concrete experiences that they found challenging in order to garner new insights and lead to change. This aligns with Kolb's (2015) idea that learning arises through engagement with novel experiences and that reflecting on those experiences can transform understanding and behaviour. Freire (1970/2014) captures this well, writing that "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 72). Each of these insights support the idea of student learning as part of an iterative process.

Experiential learning highlights the role of experiences as the foundation for learning and cautions that transformation alone is insufficient without something to be transformed (Kolb, 2015). Transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1991) can complement this by exploring how certain disorienting experiences can catalyse profound shifts in meaning-making. It is described further in the next subsection.

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning theory describes how learners can experience profound transformation in themselves and others through acquiring new information (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1995; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow, 2006). Lee and colleagues (2022) draw on transformative learning in their work with virtual exchange (VE). They describe how project-based learning—similar to the business project that the students

undertake in this study—can become a site for students to transform their outlooks and behaviours through participation in project-based learning in tandem with critical reflection.

Strange and Gibson (2017) likewise utilise transformative learning theory to explore whether transformative learning occurs in study abroad and whether this varies based on programme length and by degree of experiential learning participation. They write that in an international education context, the goal of transformative learning is “to move students from perspectives that have allowed ethnocentrism and dualistic epistemologies and allow the creation of a new frame of reference that promotes cultural pluralism” (Berwick & Whalley, 2000, cited in Strange & Gibson, 2017, pp. 87–88). Strange and Gibson (2017) view study abroad experiences that move students out of their comfort zone, even in short-term programmes, as the ideal opportunities to create a change in thinking, which then leads to changes in action, as is explored in this dissertation.

### ***Disorienting Dilemma***

One key element from Mezirow (1978, 1991) that explores the student learning experience is the concept of the “disorienting dilemma.” Mezirow writes:

A disorienting dilemma that begins the process of transformation also can result from an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or from efforts to understand a different culture with customs that contradict our own previously accepted presuppositions. Any major challenge to an established perspective can result in a transformation. These challenges are painful; they often call into question deeply held personal values and threaten our very sense of self’ (Mezirow, 1991, p. 98).

Mezirow’s concept of the “disorienting dilemma” (1991) complements Kolb’s (2015) experiential learning theory by exploring how critical reflection on the disorienting dilemmas can

lead to personal transformation, which reinforces the reflective dimension that is central to Kolb's learning cycle. This concept was used with students to explore their conceptions of "disorienting dilemmas" as participants in the programme.

Experiential learning theory and the concept of "stretch activities" joined with transformative learning and the concept of "disorienting dilemmas" provide a framework for understanding student experiences in the context of HEPs. Experiential learning underscores the concept of learning-as-process which is captured via the longitudinal data collection in this study. The ways in which the learning process can be disorienting while also pushing students out of their comfort zones is further investigated as part of the learning cycle, and the role of scaffolding is explored through the research questions as well.

### **Belonging**

"Belonging" is a related concept that works alongside experiential learning and transformative learning theories to explore students' experiences. It relates to RQ 3: "How does the programme design support student belonging, and in what ways do students exercise agency in creating their own connections?" Table 3 provides an overview of where these theories fit in relation to the research questions.

**Table 3**

*Frameworks Related to Students’ Experiences*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Theoretical Basis</b>
<b>RQ 1:</b> How do students’ perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme?	<b>Experiential learning theory</b> (Dewey, 1938/1997; Kolb, 1984; Kolb, 2015) <b>Transformative learning theory</b> (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1995; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow, 2006)
<b>RQ 3:</b> How does the programme design support student belonging, and in what ways do students exercise agency in creating their own connections?	<b>Concepts of belonging</b> (Leask, 2009; Mittelmeier, 2025; Yao, 2015)

Three concepts are explored in relation to the concept of “sense of belonging”: 1) Leask’s discussion of the use of formal and informal curriculum to promote meaningful interactions between home and international students (2009); 2) Yao’s conception of “sense of belonging” (2015), and 3) Mittelmeier’s problematisation of the concept of “integration” (2025).

Leask (2009) explores this concept of belonging as it relates to domestic and international students. She explores ways that the formal and informal curriculum can be designed to foster meaningful interaction between students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Leask, 2009). She views the informal curriculum as a central way to create a “third space” or “a meeting place between different cultures where there is recognition of the manifestation of cultural difference and where equal and meaningful reconstructive cross-cultural dialogue can occur” (Leask, 2009, p. 217). This conceptualisation will be explored further, as it relates to third spaces as a component of the VE.

***Sense of Belonging***

Yao’s (2015) concept of “sense of belonging” bears some similarities to the ideas expressed by Leask. Yao writes:

Feelings of belonging are a basic human need and often serve as motivation for positive behavior (Maslow 1954; Strayhorn 2012). The need to belong and to ‘fit in’ are a part of human desire to find connection and community with others. Sense of belonging is a concept based on the relational nature of individuals and groups. The need for belonging is particularly relevant for college students who are thrust into a foreign environment with strangers when they attend college (Yao, 2015, p. 8).

Yao calls for U.S. educators to “increase students’ sense of belonging rather than their integration to campus,” (p. 6). She uses “sense of belonging” as

a construct that influences students’ performance and success in college. Within a collegiate context, sense of belonging is important because many students are ‘inclined to feel isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible’ (Strayhorn 2012, p. 10), all of which can influence students’ persistence and satisfaction with their collegiate careers (Yao, 2015, p. 6).

She problematizes the use of “integration” writing that it cedes a high level of influence to a “dominant peer group” (pp. 7–8). In addition, it puts the responsibility of integration onto the shoulders of international students. She notes that in some cases, international students may be in the country for a limited time and be planning to return home. This was the case for the U.S. students who became international students when they travelled to Brazil. Her discussion of the utility of “sense of belonging” is therefore particularly useful in a context such as a Hybrid Exchange Programme, wherein students engage cross-culturally over a limited timeframe without the intention to immigrate permanently to a new country.

*Criticising Integration*

Mittelmeier, too, challenges the use of “integration” in favour of more “critical and ethical” ways of framing research with international students (2025, p. 10). She calls on practitioners to refrain from using the word “integration,” which is based on Durkheim’s (1897) conceptualisation of “social integration” and is premised on the idea that those who are different should blend in for the good of society (2025, p. 3). She describes ways in which integration becomes politicised, is used to “other” those who are different, is used to erase difference, and ignores structural inequalities. While she does not suggest a new term to address the issue, she calls on scholars and practitioners to use a critical lens in considering their language. She suggests they look for new language that evolves beyond deficit-based and homogenising approaches and that instead is capable of enacting new and transformative ways of recognising students’ diversity while also questioning structural inequalities. In this study, “belonging” is conceptualised as engaging in meaningful participation within the group, feeling validated and understood by peers, and feeling included by other students.

In the context of Hybrid Exchange Programmes and student exchanges in general, ideas like connectivity and belonging are paramount since exchanges, by their nature, are meant to be social and interactional. The theories described here provide ways of thinking about the kinds of exchanges educators seek to foster, both formally and informally. They also highlight potential preconceptions and problematic tendencies that can undergird frameworks related to international students. The next section describes how critical frameworks can move this idea forward.

**Critical Frameworks**

The second theoretical construct that I use in this study encompass critical frameworks, which explore power dynamics within international education. These include Critical Virtual Exchange and Critical Internationalisation. These are shown alongside the related research questions in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Critical Frameworks*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Theoretical Basis</b>
<b>RQ 2:</b> What challenges do students encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context?	<b>Critical Virtual Exchange</b> (Helm, 2024; Hinck et al., 2024; O’Dowd, 2023b; Sicka & Atajanova, 2024; Whatley et al., 2022)
<b>RQ 4:</b> How does participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes differentially benefit U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by U.S. and Brazilian students?	<b>Critical Internationalisation</b> (Cai & Leask, 2024; Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; da Silva et al., 2023; De Wit & Jones, 2022; Freire, 1970; Jordão & Mandarinino Silva, 2023; Martinez et al., 2023; Mittelmeier, 2024; Stein, 2021; Yao, 2015)

**Critical Internationalisation**

Raby (2023) defines Critical Internationalisation as a field in which: the benefits, trajectories, and foci of the field of internationalization of higher education (IHE) are questioned. A decolonial perspective shows that IHE is not always positive as it can perpetuate harmful and unequal contexts that institutionalise colonialism via superiority of the North, whiteness, and the use of English as the language of discourse (Raby, 2023, p. 1).

This definition will support explorations of Global South-Global North exchanges as well as the concept of reciprocity and is unpacked in the next two subsections.

*Global South-Global North Exchanges*

A decolonial lens is useful in critically examining any international education practice but is essential in contexts such as this study which examine interactions between participants from the Global North and Global South. Critical Internationalisation challenges the notion that internationalisation is inherently positive and beneficial (Stein, 2021). Critical Internationalisation (CI) also questions internationalisation's complicity in perpetuating unequal systems (Stein, 2021, p. 1773). Likewise, it highlights and examines the unequal positions that Global North and Global South institutions occupy (Vavrus & Pekol, 2015). It also explores the hegemonic role of English language (Jordão & Mandarino Silva, 2023). CI is useful in this study because it offers tools for exploring power dynamics and unpacking whose needs are being served.

One inherent component of Critical Internationalisation is that internationalisation is not "neutral." Stein describes how traditional scholarship on internationalisation fails to take into account the ways in which internationalisation reinforces "Eurocentric knowledge production, exploitative relationships, and inequitable access to resources" (Stein, 2021, p. 3). Likewise, Chiappa and Finardi (2021) use Critical Internationalisation as a way to shed light on "hierarchical power asymmetries installed during colonial times" and argue that "the potential benefits of IHE need to be problematized in the light of power dynamics that get produced and reproduced in this process." (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021, p. 27). In order for these power asymmetries and structural inequities to be addressed, Mittelmeier and colleagues (2024) write that researchers need to use an "equity-driven lens" (p. 549, see also George Mwangi and Yao, 2021).

### *Reciprocity*

Related to the student-learning concept of the “equity-driven lens” (Mittelmeier et al., 2024) is the idea of reciprocity as a central component of exchanges. In the context of Hybrid Exchange Programmes, the concept of reciprocity can be foregrounded using a critical lens. In a VE context, Helm writes that virtual exchanges:

should be based on values of reciprocity, mutual learning, and relational learning, which is defined by Icaza and Vázquez (2018) as follows, ‘A relational approach is not simply a participatory approach, a relational approach is one in which the diverse backgrounds and the geo-historical positioning of the different participants in the classroom are rendered valuable in a dignified way for the learning of all. Practices of teaching and learning that are grounded in relational approaches or democratic forms of teaching can contribute to decolonising our forms of learning (p. 120)’ (Helm, 2024, p. 3).

Reciprocity is central to Hybrid Exchange Programmes because such programmes seek to avoid the one-sidedness of traditional study abroad by fostering mutual learning and shared networking between visiting and host-country students. Nevertheless, structural inequities, such as curricular integration and the dominant position of the English language can reinforce disparities even while providing the very opportunities that the host-country students seek.

### **Critical Virtual Exchange**

Another significant critical framework is Critical Virtual Exchange (Sicka & Atajanova, 2024). This helps to frame research related to RQ 3 “How does the programme design support student belonging, and in what ways do students exercise agency in creating their own connections?” Sicka and Atajanova (2024) put forth the Critical Virtual Exchange framework as a way to “foster fair, co-creative, and meaningful partnerships and collaborations” (p. 77).

Critical Virtual Exchange shares some similarities with Critical Internationalisation in terms of the focus on equity, power, and the ways in which the tools utilised in this domain are understood to potentially reinforce existing power disparities. According to Sicka and Atajanova (2024), Critical Virtual Exchange is rooted in critical pedagogy (Wimpenny et al., 2022) and decolonial thought (Sicka & Hou, 2023), and is attentive to how linguistic hierarchy, geopolitical asymmetry, and other inequities can shape VE encounters. It also aligns VE with global movements centred on social justice and sustainability.

Critical Virtual Exchange shares some similarities with Critical Internationalisation in terms of the focus on equity, power dynamics, and the ways in which that the tools utilised in this domain are understood to potentially reinforce existing power disparities. This framework aligns with work by Helm (2024) that explores the ways in which digital tools need to be critically examined. She explores how such tools can influence the ways in which we interact with each other in a social realm. The choice of which language is used for the exchange is also an essential way in which the communication is mediated, and can contribute to a “monolingual, monocultural mindset” which in turn creates power disparities (p. 23). Finally, Critical Virtual Exchange can be used to draw attention to technological access issues that threaten to make digital learning less equitable (Aldrich & Whatley, 2024; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Helm & Guth, 2022; Huang, 2022; O’Dowd & Beaven, 2021).

### ***Thirdspace Concept***

Critical Virtual Exchange can also be utilised to explore the concept of “thirdspaces”. The concept of the “third place”—which is also captured as “thirdspaces” by Guimarães and Finardi (2021), Orsini-Jones et al., (2025); Sicka and Atajanova, (2024); Wimpenny et al. (2022)

in a VE context—aligns well with the HEP context, wherein new spaces are created within the VE and become sites for community building that extend into the in-person exchange in Brazil. Leask (2009) describes not a “thirdspace,” but a “third place,” as a key dimension of enhancing community building among students from different countries. She writes that the informal curriculum can become an opportunity to enhance intercultural communication, wherein students and staff are moved into a “third place,” which she describes as “a meeting place between different cultures where there is recognition of the manifestation of cultural difference and where equal and meaningful reconstructive cross-cultural dialogue can occur” (pp. 217–218).

This concept is echoed in Guimarães and Finardi (2021), who describe “Thirdspaces” by drawing on Soja (1996). They write:

Thirdspace learning can also be seen as an alternative for decolonial, non-dominant, borderless, collaborative forms of learning or educational approaches that acknowledge the hybrid and fluid dynamics of our personal, professional, disciplinary, and civic realities (Postma 2012) (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021, p. 645).

Wimpenny and colleagues (2022) expand on this in the context of Global South-North Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). They utilise the concept of Thirdspace as a way to challenge Western hegemony and to create spaces for diverse ways of knowing, being, and relating. They place importance on addressing digital accessibility challenges and promoting inclusive curricula. They also emphasise the need for collaborative, non-hierarchical learning environments that value diverse ways of knowing. Within “thirdspaces,” Helm describes how the communication platforms available can impact the kinds of interactions that can occur (p. 20). She notes that:

whilst asynchronous text-based communication allows time for reflection before writing, synchronous communication is more immediate, but means that turns must be short and frequent. Text-based communication allows for a degree of anonymity, with the advantages and challenges this presents, whilst video-based allows for more online presence. Furthermore, the ways we use online communication tools are learned through the communities we are socialised into (Helm, 2024, p. 20).

The role that technology plays—the choices made in the formal and informal curricula and the mediums employed—are explored with more nuance in RQ 3.

Orsini-Jones et al. (2025) extend these conceptualisations by framing COIL as a “postdigital Third Space” that is “connected,” “embodied,” “relational,” and “socio-material,” aligning their understanding with Wang and Canarajah’s concept of the “postdigital condition,” defined as “a condition where the virtual and physical mediate each other to form layered and hybridized spaces that transcend the online/offline distinction” (2024, p. 1. cited in Orsini-Jones et al., 2025, p. 238). Following female COIL participants’ experiences, they argue that Third Spaces in VE offered a sense of safety to participants, where the VE participants reported feeling “heard and valued” rather than “mis-understood, mis-interpreted, and or unheard/silenced” (p. 247).

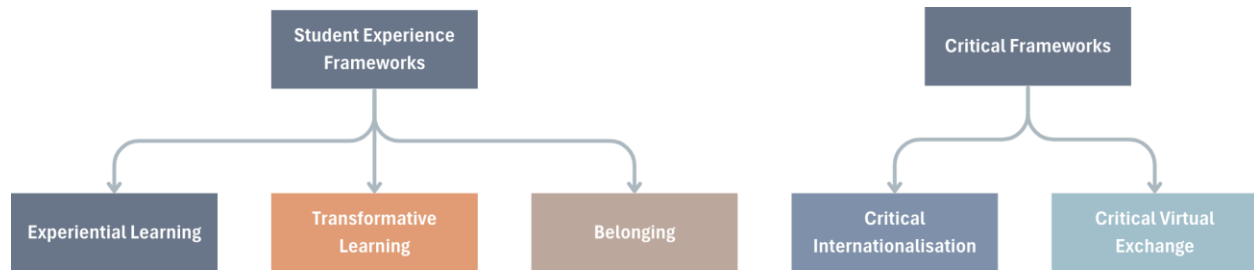
Critical Internationalisation and Critical Virtual Exchange are essential lenses for examining the power dynamics within Hybrid Exchange Programmes and the pathways they could provide toward increased equity and reciprocity in internationalisation spaces. These frameworks shed light on the complexities of cross-cultural communication in online spaces and the ways in which structural inequities and language hegemony can shape students’ experiences.

**Conclusion of the Theoretical Framework**

The integration of student experience theories and critical frameworks provides the essential components for a theoretical foundation that can explore the multifaceted nature of Hybrid Exchange Programmes, as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*Theoretical Frameworks*



Three theories support the exploration of student experiences: with experiential learning theory and transformative learning theory supporting the exploration of students’ evolving perceptions of growth through reflective, immersive learning (RQ 1), while the concept of sense of belonging can highlight how programme design fosters community and (RQ 3). Two theories provide the necessary critical lens for evaluating this novel type of international education programming that involves a North-South exchange. Critical Internationalisation highlights power asymmetries and linguistic hegemony (RQ 4), and Critical Virtual Exchange emphasises the potential for technology to shape equitable learning environments and also to potentially reinforce inequities (RQ 4). By connecting these theories, the framework offers a comprehensive lens that both supports the research questions and also underscores the transformative potential of Hybrid Exchange Programmes.

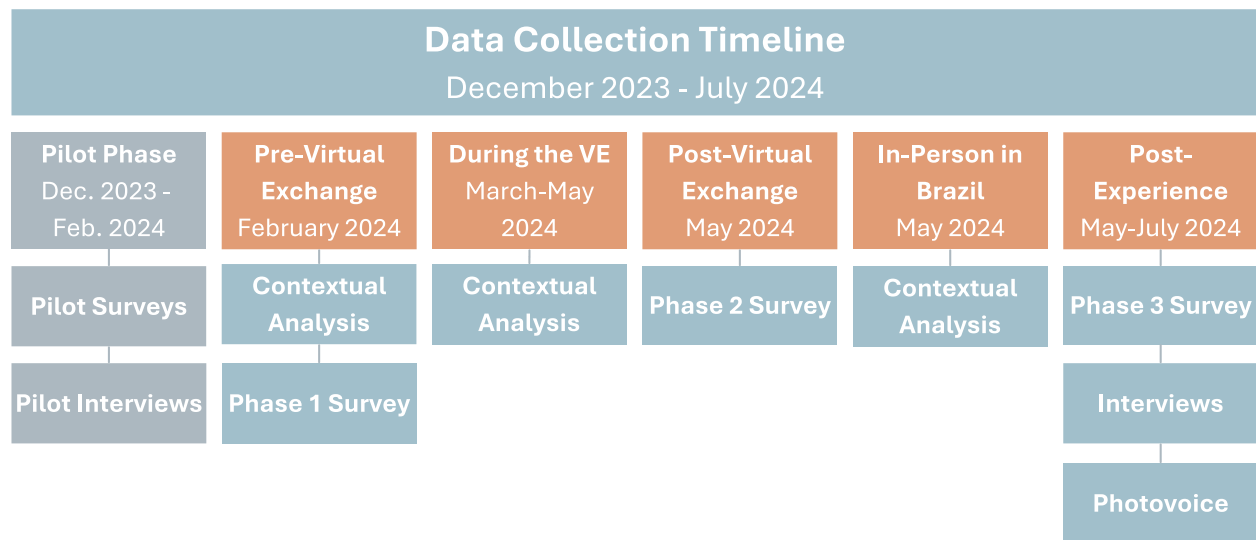


CHAPTER 4: METHODS

This chapter outlines the methods that are employed in this dissertation to explore and learn from student experiences in Hybrid Exchange Programmes. This process had many different phases, from pilot to classroom observation to spending time in Brazil with the students, to reconnecting with them on Zoom. Figure 5 provides a visual overview of these phases.

**Figure 5**

*Data Collection Timeline for Pilot and Main Research Phase*



The chapter begins by reviewing the research objectives and research questions. Next it summarises the pilot study that served as the basis for informing the survey design and research questions in the main research phase. The section on the main research phase includes five parts: 1) description of the research setting and justification of the adoption of a mixed-methods case study approach; 2) ethical considerations and researcher positionality; 3) data collection methods, including contextual analysis, surveys, interviews, and photo elicitation; 4) overview of the data analysis procedures. Finally, the fifth section examines the study’s trustworthiness from qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

## Objectives

This study focuses on an emerging area of higher education internationalisation by focusing on the student experience within a Hybrid Exchange Programme (HEP). It explores how students articulate their goals related to personal growth, intercultural development, linguistic proficiency, academic development, and professional development within the context of a Hybrid Exchange Programme. The study delves into students' reflections on these goals and explores the ways in which perspectives shift and develop over time. Finally, the study also compares the differences in experiences and outcomes between U.S. and Brazilian participants.

The objectives of the study are:

1. to explore how students' perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme
2. to understand the challenges that students may encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context
3. to describe how the programme design impacted student belonging and connection, and to explore the ways in which students exercise agency in creating their own connections
4. to illuminate the ways in which participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes may differentially benefit U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by U.S. and Brazilian students

## Research Questions

To reach these objectives, the following research questions are explored:

- RQ 1: How do students' perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme?
- RQ 2: What challenges do students encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context?
- RQ 3: How does the programme design support student belonging, and in what ways do students exercise agency in creating their own connections?
- RQ 4: How does participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes differentially benefit U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by U.S. and Brazilian students?

### **Pilot Study: Purpose and Rationale**

In 2022, when this research project began, Hybrid Exchange Programmes were under-researched as a form of international education. Few prior examples provided a methodological foundation, and those that did offered descriptive overviews rather than methodological research (e.g. Kessler et al., 2020; Welzer et al., 2018). As such, I considered it essential to conduct a pilot project to refine the research questions and methods, validate instruments, improve survey and interview protocols, and understand the length of time needed to complete the phases of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kim, 2010; Watson et al., 2007). The next section describes how this was conducted.

### **Design and Implementation of the Pilot**

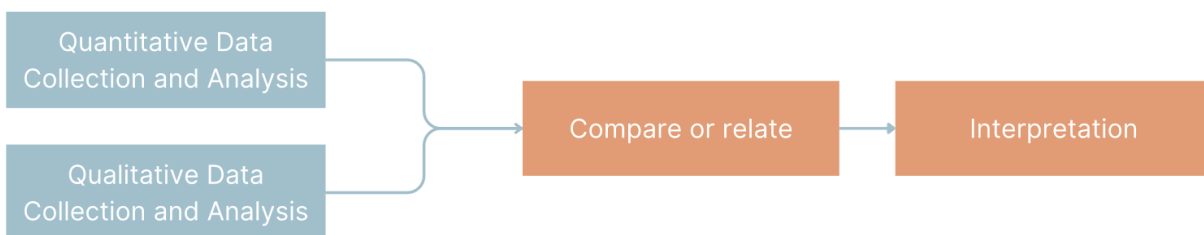
From December 2023 to February 2024, I conducted a pilot study to refine my research design and instruments in preparation for the main phase of the study. It included students who had participated in a similar Hybrid Exchange Programme (HEP) in spring 2023, which was one-

year prior to the main research phase. This group was also composed of U.S. and Brazilian undergraduate students working on a business consulting project both virtually and in person in Brazil. The students came from multiple universities throughout Brazil and from a large public university in the Midwestern United States. I held a limited role in the 2023 programme, as I worked as part of the global office that organised the programme, I had some responsibilities related to logistical planning of the programme in Brazil, and I also assisted with pre-departure orientation.

For the pilot, I used a convergent parallel design to explore student experiences (see Figure 6). Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) describe the convergent parallel design as occurring: when the researcher uses concurrent timing to implement the quantitative and qualitative strands during the same phase of the research process, prioritises the methods equally, and keeps the strands independent during analysis and then mixes the results during the overall interpretation (p. 70)

**Figure 6**

*The Convergent Parallel Design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018)*



A convergent parallel design was chosen for the pilot study to account for the simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data after the programme ended. This structure facilitated my research design, which included a comparison and integration of interview and survey data.

### *Pilot Data Collection*

Data collection for this phase began with the administration of the pilot survey after the programme ended in 2023. It was sent by email to all participants. The survey was followed by semi-structured interviews also conducted after the programme ended. The pilot study informed adjustments to the methods, research questions, and programme design.

### *Pilot Survey*

My preliminary research questions guided the pilot survey design. Because there were no existing survey instruments for Hybrid Exchange Programmes at the time of this study, I selected survey questions that were based on previous study abroad experience surveys. This included Anderson and Lawton's (2015) Motivation to Study Abroad instrument, which provided a basis for capturing significant elements of students' personal growth, including self-confidence, independence, and maturity, as well as intercultural growth, including understanding diverse cultures and global perspectives. To add depth to the exploration of personal and intercultural growth, additional questions were incorporated from Mohajeri Norris and Dwyer (2005). These focused on areas such as tolerance for ambiguity and reflection on personal cultural values. Additionally, a question from Dwyer (2004) on professional networking was included to align with the programme's emphasis on business visits and the business consulting project, ensuring that the survey could address participants' experiences related to professional development. I sent the single-phase survey to 15 Brazilian students and 40 U.S. students and received responses from 7 Brazilian students and 11 U.S. students.

### *Pilot Interviews*

I conducted interviews with a smaller subset of the students. Because this was the pilot and the timeframe was limited, I intentionally kept the sample size smaller. I randomly selected

and asked for interviews from two U.S. students and two Brazilian students. Of these, one U.S. student and two Brazilian students accepted, and one U.S. student did not respond. Unlike the longitudinal data collection planned for the main study, the pilot gathered data only retrospectively, after the programme's completion. This allowed for initial insights into students' perceptions but highlighted the need for longitudinal data collection to capture how students' perceptions evolved over time and to better understand the overall experience.

### ***Pilot Study Data Considerations***

Results of pilot studies are not typically intended nor suited for publication since the main objective in conducting them is not to obtain findings or results (Kim, 2010; Watson et al., 2007). The purpose of the 2023 pilot study was not to create generalisable findings but to test and validate the survey and interview instruments to gain a better understanding of the programme to aid me in mapping out my research strategies. For this reason, I elected not to conduct a formal quantitative analysis. More importantly, the pilot only included a post-programme survey. Without baseline metrics, it is not possible to determine whether one cohort (Brazilian students or U.S. students) began the programme with higher scores thereby requiring the scores to be normalised. It is important to note that the survey changed between the pilot and the main phase based on these findings. The Likert scale was reworded and required short-answer items were added for purposes of triangulation. Furthermore, findings from the pilot were used to modify the programme that was studied in the main research phase, and those adjustments are described in the next section.

### **Adjustments to Research Questions as a Result of the Pilot Study**

Prior to the pilot study, my research questions focused on a) changes in student perceptions, b) growth over the course of the programme and c) comparison of experiences

between American and Brazilian students (currently, RQ 1 and RQ 4). After the pilot, two different themes emerged. First, students frequently described the challenges of the VE environment. Second, the Brazilian students focused a great deal on the centrality of English language development for them. These themes were unexpected findings for me because I thought that the students who participated would have such a solid command of English that they would be more interested in developing academic and professional skills than linguistic skills. The pilot surveys and interviews enabled me to more fully understand the motivations and interests of these students and how they may have been different than my expectations. Due to the prominence of the VE experience and the role of language development in the results of the pilot phase, I added RQ 2: *What challenges do students encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context?*

### ***Refinement of Survey Instrument for the Main Research Phase***

Analysis of pilot data revealed areas to refine within the survey. I reworded the Likert scale for clarity. I added required short-answer questions in the main phase to encourage students to elaborate on their responses and to allow for new themes to emerge. In Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the main research phase, these included (with verb tenses adjusted based on the phase at which the survey was administered):

- What are/were some goals you have as a participant in this programme?
- What do/did you perceive as some of the challenges of participating?
- What are/were you most excited about?
- Do/did you think this experience enhanced your future employability or suitability for graduate school? If so, how?

Based on a thematic analysis of student interview responses in the pilot phase, I identified recurrent themes related to self-confidence, overcoming language barriers, and getting out of one's comfort zone during the programme. As such, in the main research phase, I added three new open-ended questions at the end of the survey in Phase 2 and Phase 3:

- Can you describe an activity you participated in as part of the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil that challenged you to develop new knowledge, skills, or perspectives? What was the activity, and how did it push you beyond your previous capabilities? Reflecting on your experience, what factors do you think influenced your approach to this challenging activity? (Source: researcher)
- Describe whether participating in the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil has influenced your approach to challenges and new opportunities in your daily life. Have you made changes as a result of your experiences during the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil? Have you taken on any new activities as a result of participating? If so, please describe. (Source: researcher)
- Reflecting on the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil, can you describe a situation that you found confusing or challenging to your usual ways of thinking? Did you change how you normally act as a result? (Source: researcher)

### ***Programme Design Recommendations from the Pilot Study***

Insights from the 2023 pilot informed practical changes to the 2024 Hybrid Exchange Programme (HEP), which was the programme studied in the main research phase. I worked closely with the programme faculty from the U.S. and Brazil who oversaw the programme to co-create and implement seven changes based on the finding from the pilot:

1. Schedule mandatory synchronous work time. Students felt there was insufficient scheduled time for team collaboration. The instructors were able to implement a scheduling change in 2024.

2. Implement icebreakers and getting-to-know-you activities. The instructors were able to implement this in 2024, for instance by having students create team virtual backgrounds as a more playful way for students to create a team identity.

3. Conduct regular check-ins via survey to see how teams are doing. I conducted my own surveys, but the instructors did not conduct surveys to check in on group dynamics. It may be implemented in future iterations of this programme.

4. Ensure equal access to virtual communication. Students from the 2023 pilot recommended that all participants have similar technological access, including the use of individual screens during virtual meetings. In particular, some Brazilian students noted that some U.S. students worked together in the same physical space and using one screen. This led to side conversations and feelings of exclusion by those not in the same room together. For 2024, it was underscored that there should be one student per screen so that all communication in the VE would take place more equitably.

5. Allocate more in-person time in Brazil: In 2023, the Brazilian students were only on site with the Americans for 3 days. In 2024, the whole group spent 5 days together and some Brazilian students were present for the entire 10 days.

6. Encourage cameras to be on during virtual meetings: In 2023, some students found it hard to connect in the VE because their teammates' cameras were not always on. In 2024, all U.S. students were required to have cameras on. The Brazilian students complied with this to the

extent possible but were occasionally unable to do so due to extenuating circumstances related to commuting or Wi-Fi accessibility.

### **Pilot Study Conclusions**

The pilot study was an essential tool to refine both the research design for this study and for enhancing the 2024 HEP programme itself. I was also able to learn from the participants and gain a better understanding of what participating in the programme was like at a practical level. The students who participated in the pilot study revealed areas of discontentment with both the VE and the in-person components. These insights proved valuable to explore in the main research phase in addition to informing changes for the 2024 iteration of the programme.

### **Main Research Phase: February 2024–July 2024**

This section has eight parts: 1) describes the research setting, 2) provides a rationale for the use of a mixed methods case-study, 3) reviews positionality and ethics, 4) describes data collection, 5) discusses the contextual analysis of the case, 6) overviews the surveys, interviews, photo elicitation methodologies, 7) explores data analysis and triangulation, and 8) concludes with a discussion of the study's trustworthiness and limitations.

### **Research Setting**

The main research phase took place in multiple settings, both in-person and virtually. Twenty-four students from one U.S. university and sixteen students from several universities across Brazil met online to work on collaborative problem-solving projects that were part of a business course called "Social Entrepreneurship & Cross-Cultural Project Management." The U.S. students took the course as part of their courseload, and the Brazilian students took the course as a non-credit extracurricular activity. Students used the Canvas learning management system, the WhatsApp messaging and calling app, the Zoom video conferencing platform, and

email. Many also utilised social media platforms, which they undertook independently. The in-person component of the programme took place in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in May 2024. Further details describing the programme can be found in the upcoming section titled “Contextual Analysis.”

### **Mixed Methods Rationale**

Mixed methods research is needed to address this study’s research questions because it enables a more comprehensive understanding of students’ experiences. Quantitative data from the survey responses helps track trends in personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth. Qualitative data from open-ended survey questions and interviews helps to capture personal narratives to explain these changes. Data has been triangulated to identify patterns and explore students’ experiences in a more holistic manner.

This study defines mixed methods as the implementation of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis with the purpose of offering a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because quantitative and qualitative research yields diverse types of data, and because each has its own assets and weaknesses, researchers can arrive at a more holistic understanding of the research questions by integrating both forms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In such approaches, it is common for one form of data—either quantitative or qualitative—to take primacy in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In the data collection phase, both quantitative and qualitative data were given equal consideration. In interpreting the data, however, qualitative took precedence, as that data captures the richness, emotional depth, and wide variety of topics deemed important by participants. It offers insights that extend beyond what can be measured numerically. The quantitative data serve a complementary role, providing a structured background against which

these narratives can be interpreted, most notably in the visualisation of student experiences as a V-shaped trajectory across the programme phases, as will be explored in Chapter 5.

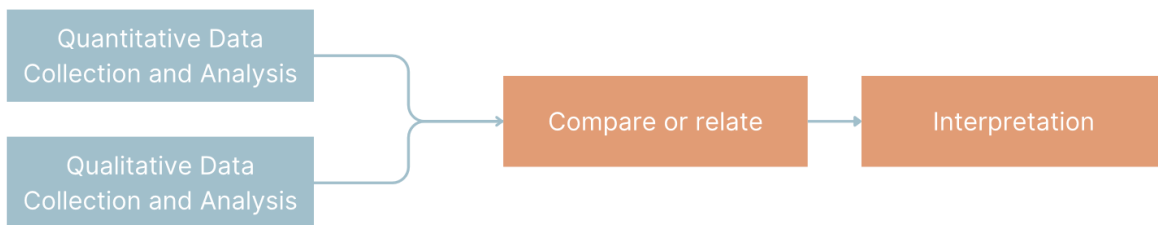
In developing a mixed-methods approach, I utilised elements of both convergent parallel design and transformative design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). According to the authors:

The convergent parallel design (also referred to as the convergent design) occurs when the researcher uses concurrent timing to implement the quantitative and qualitative strands during the same phase of the research process, prioritizes the methods equally, and keeps the strands independent during analysis and then mixes the results during the overall interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 70).

In this sequencing, the qualitative and quantitative data are also compared and related to each other, which follows the “convergent parallel design” as shown in Figure 7 (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

**Figure 7**

*The Convergent Parallel Design (from Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 69)*



In addition, I draw on the “transformative design” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) because my data has been collected in phases and the final phase of the collection—the interviews—draws on information gathered in all prior phases (see Figure 8). Figure 9 shows how I combined these two designs for mixed-methods research in this study.

**Figure 8**

*The Transformative Design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 70)*



**Figure 9**

*Cleary Adaptation of the Convergent Parallel and Transformative Designs*

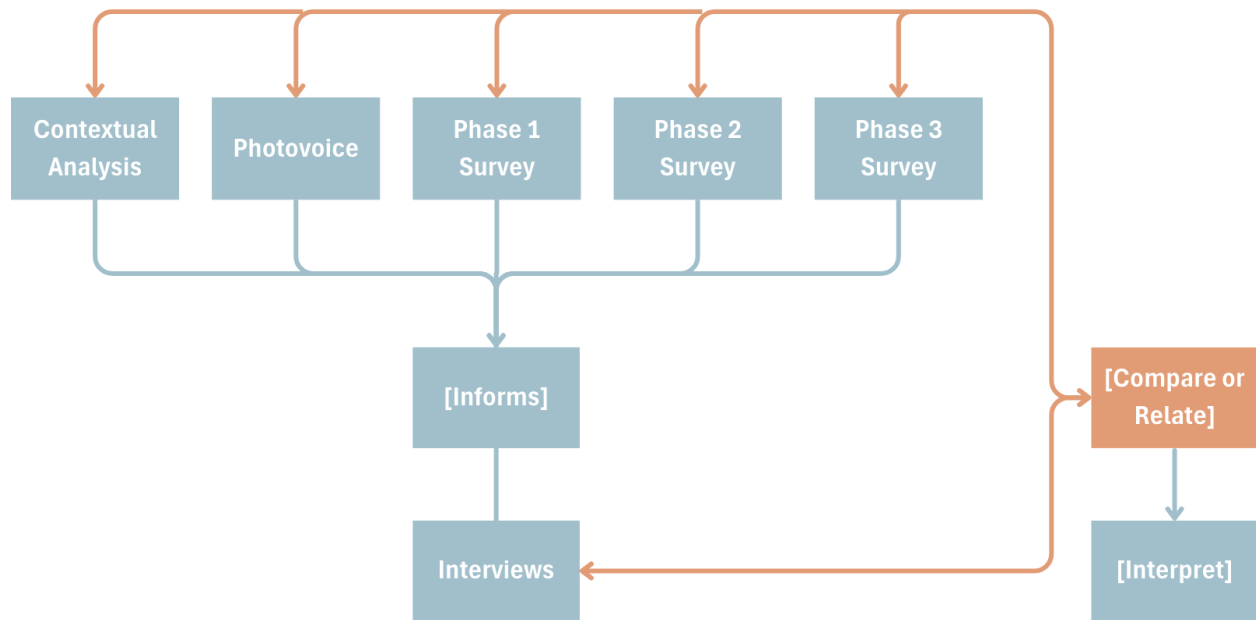


Figure 9 overviews my adaptation of convergent parallel and transformative design into a new protocol that shows how the contextual analysis, photo elicitation, and surveys all inform the interviews. The dotted orange lines then show how those bodies of data are then compared and related to each other and then finally interpreted. This final protocol is my own methodological

contribution, integrating aspects of both Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) designs to capture the nuances of Hybrid Exchange Programmes.

### **Case Study Rationale**

This mixed-methods research project aims to describe the student experience of participating in a Hybrid Exchange Programme. This is a uniquely structured programme that does not lend itself to comparison with other similar programme types, so a case study methodology is being employed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As Goertz and Mahoney (2012) describe it:

the case-study researcher will inevitably carry out an over-time, processual analysis of the case. Many different observations at different points in time will be considered. The analyst will normally identify historical junctures when key events directed the case toward certain outcomes and not others. She or he may well pause to consider how small changes during these junctures might have led the case to follow a different path.

Consideration will also be given to the ways in which historical events are linked across time, one leading to another, yielding a sequence of causes that culminate in the outcome of interest (p. 89).

The case study is divided into temporal sequences to understand changes that students may experience during the programme and just after it ends. Goertz and Mahoney (2012) write that:

Indeed, unless the N of the study is more than a handful of cases, it is unrealistic to believe that these small-N comparative methods—by themselves—offer a strong basis for most kinds of causal inference. Without any within-case analysis, the leverage gained for testing explanations when moving from one case to three or four cases is modest (p. 89).

Given (2008) writes that case studies are more appropriate than large-N studies for understanding individual perceptions “because they can invest heavily in in-depth interviews or discourse analysis” (Given, 2008, p. 68). With a sample of 24 American and 16 Brazilian students, the sample size is small and is more suited for deeper description. Goertz and Mahoney (2012) write that, “While some leverage can be gained by increasing the N of qualitative studies, if the total number of cases remains small, the main basis for causal inference must derive from within-case analysis. Small-N comparison usually does not permit strong cross-case tests of hypotheses” (p. 87). The primary form of comparison is “within-case” (Weaver-Hightower, 2018) and includes changes in the experience over the phases of the programme and the differences in programme experience for the U.S. and Brazilian students. This follows Denzin and Lincoln (2018), who describe “intercategorical complexity” as “centring comparison of groups across analytical categories” (p. 275).

### **Positionality**

My own motivations and assumptions about international education have led to my interest in this topic. I have spent 15 years working in international education because I believe it has the potential to foster understanding and forge connection across borders, nationalities, languages, and other differences. I believe that when people learn to appreciate and empathise with diverse perspectives, they are more likely to value each other and work collaboratively to address global challenges. My experiences and background lead me to hope that when students connect across borders, they will develop into individuals who support initiatives that benefit humanity broadly, such as ending poverty and hunger, supporting policies that benefit the environment, and promoting peace and justice.

My professional and academic experiences influence my positionality. I am currently enrolled in a doctoral programme outside of my home country that operates in a hybrid format, in English, with a combination of virtual meetings and in-person meetings for which I travel to Italy. This experience is similar to that of the U.S. students in this study who participate in virtual activities and international travel, while primarily using English as participants. My experience in the hybrid international doctoral programme has opened my eyes to the opportunities and challenges of learning in such contexts. As a practitioner I have been involved in running ten Hybrid Exchange Programmes and worked as a programme leader for three of them. These experiences motivated me to understand their value and contribute to improving the overall programme design.

It is also important to note that I held a leadership role in the 2024 HEP programme under study. I was not the primary programme leader. I was one of the three leaders from the U.S. university. My responsibilities focused on pre-departure preparation logistics and ensuring smooth operations on-site, such as keeping students organised, ensuring they were where they needed to be, and assisting in the event of health or safety emergencies. I was not involved in assigning grades, as this responsibility rested with the programme faculty—one from the U.S. and one from Brazil. To mitigate any potential influence my leadership role might have on the students' participation in my research, I introduced myself as a PhD student first and made it clear that participation in my study was entirely voluntary and had no impact on their grades or future opportunities to study abroad. This distinction helped create a clear boundary between my leadership responsibilities and my role as a researcher. Balancing the programme leadership responsibilities and collecting data was at times challenging, but the overall outcome was

considerably richer through my ability to experience the in-person exchange firsthand and get to know the students.

As noted in my positionality statement in Chapter Two, my role as a researcher was shaped by my U.S. and European academic background and by conducting research in Portuguese-speaking contexts, where the language of the participants is not one I speak. I addressed these factors by maintaining reflexivity, engaging with key literature, and consulting with practitioners and scholars with a greater depth of experience in this region.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval was granted by University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's Institutional Review Board (Protocol 24518) and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore's Institutional Review Board (Protocol 98/24). Participant data is stored in a FERPA-compliant, secure, cloud-based storage service that meets requirements for confidential and restricted data and requires multi-factor authentication to access data. The data storage protection system is FIPS 140-2 certified, and each file is encrypted using AES 256-bit encryption. The researcher is the only individual with access to the password and the technology required to complete the multi-factor authentication.

### **Data Collection**

I utilised mixed methods to collect data over several phases between February 2024 and July 2024. There were five milestones in the data collection timeline: 1) data collected before the virtual exchange began, 2) data collected during the virtual exchange, 3) data collected after the virtual exchange had ended but before the students met in person, 4) data collected in Brazil, and 5) data collected just after the programme had ended. Each of these phases is shown in the

orange boxes in Figure 10. The blue boxes beneath each milestone show the data sourced during each of those phases.

**Figure 10**

*Data Collection Timeline*

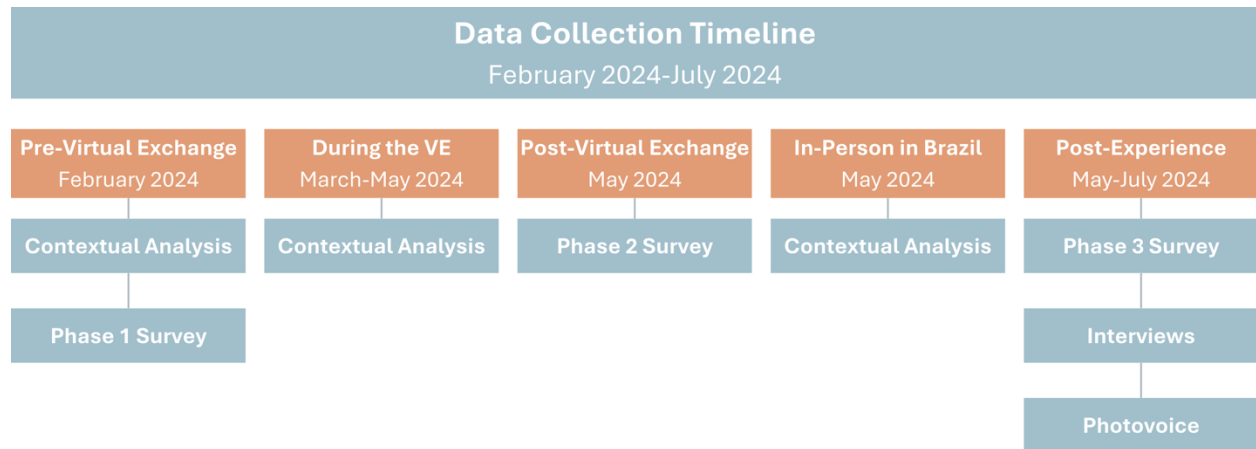
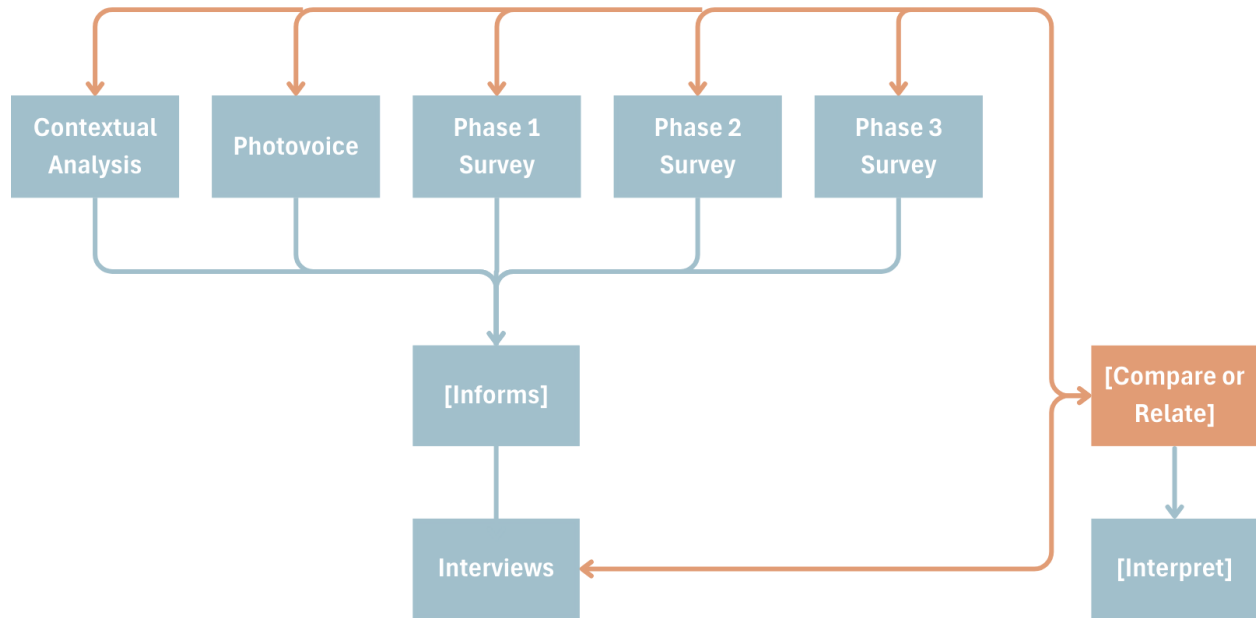


Figure 11 provides an overview of how these various sources of data came together. The contextual analysis, photo elicitation, and surveys all informed the interviews, and all forms of data collected were used for relational and comparative purposes, in service to the overall interpretation.

**Figure 11**

*Adaptation of the Convergent Parallel and Transformative Designs*



**Contextual Analysis**

The contextual analysis constructs a descriptive narrative of the research (Charmaz, 2006). I used interview transcripts, the course syllabus, observation grids, and field notes (Spradley, 1980) to build the contextual analysis (Charmaz, 2006). These sources were systematically reviewed, cross-referenced, and layered to build a coherent account that captures the programme’s development, structure, and participant experiences. The course syllabus provided structural guidance, while observation grids and field notes offered insight into both virtual and in-person activities. Interviews with key stakeholders provided additional context on the history of the programme.

**Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured interviews. These are appropriate to learn about students’ experiences in the programme after they completed the programme. Questions are listed in Table 5. I conducted the interviews on Zoom just after the on-site experience and after the course

ended (between May-July 2024) with 14 U.S. students and 9 Brazilian students, reflecting the proportional representation of overall student participation by country (24 U.S. students and 16 Brazilian students). The interview questions with the corresponding RQ can be found below in Table 5. The questions below form the basis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with students on Zoom. There was some variation including occasional follow-up questions or skipping questions that had already been addressed by the interviewee.

**Table 5**

*Semi-Structured Interview Questions and Their Corresponding RQ*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Related RQ</b>
Can you tell me a little about yourself and what interested you about this programme?	1
What have your prior travel experiences been like?	1
Did you have any specific goals at the outset of this programme?	1, 4
What were your expectations about the virtual exchange component?	2
What was it like meeting the other students in person after the virtual exchange?	3
Are you still in touch with anyone from the programme?	3
What was it like working on the business project with your team online?	2
Do you think the virtual teamwork prepared you for your time together?	3
What was the experience in Brazil like for you?	1, 3
What opportunities did you find most valuable?	3, 4
How did your perceptions of the programme change from the start of the virtual exchange to the end of the programme in Brazil?	1, 2
Did you find a picture you wanted to share from your time in Brazil or during the virtual exchange?	1, 2, 4
Based on your experience, is there anything you would recommend doing differently in future iterations of this programme? Is there anything you feel that we should definitely continue to do?	4
How do you think this experience will be impactful in your future?	4

Conducting the interviews at the conclusion of the programme served two functions. It allowed the students to reflect on the entire experience. It also enabled me to seek clarification on themes that emerged as I began to interpret the survey data.

### **Photo Elicitation**

Photo elicitation involves the use of photos or images to enable participants to share information with researchers (Cayuela Ferrero, 2023). Cayuela Ferrero writes that:

Photo-elicitation is not aimed at accessing a greater quantity of information, but rather, by using photographs during interviews, at obtaining a different quality of information (Harper, 2002; Pink, 2007) related to tacit aspects such as ideas, intentions, values and affects (Cayuela Ferrero, 2023, p. 113)

In this study, photo elicitation was utilised in a way that mirrors these goals. It allowed students to reflect on themes related to intercultural growth. It enabled them to engage in dialogue about that learning. It enabled them to inform decision-makers at their university about the learning that can take place through the Hybrid Exchange Programmes. The students participating in this study typically have camera phones within easy reach or the ability to screenshot images on their computer or phone screens. Student engagement with visually oriented platforms such as TikTok or Instagram allowed them to experiment with visual representations regularly.

I included a photo elicitation prompt as part of the semi-structured interviews. Before the interviews took place, students were asked to find a picture or a screenshot that represents a moment of cultural immersion or cultural learning that took place during the programme. The rationale behind the prompt comes from the idea of “critical learning incidents,” which Soini (2012) describes as encounters in which students have experienced as “effective, exceptional, or personally meaningful” (Soini, 2012, p. 846). Integrating photo elicitation enriched the

interviews, enabling students to select and share personally meaningful experiences and to make the decision about what to share prior to our meeting, without being influenced by the interview questions. It also helped the students to reconnect with the mindset they had during the programme, effectively mitigating the challenges of conducting interviews via Zoom weeks after the programme had concluded. While photo elicitation formed a central part of data collection, they are not displayed in this dissertation out of respect for students’ privacy. Instead, I describe the themes that emerged and foreground students’ narratives about their photographs.

**Recruitment and Selection Criteria of Participants**

In total there were 40 students, both American and Brazilian, enrolled in the Hybrid Exchange Programme studied in the main research phase: 24 from the U.S. and 16 from Brazil. All were invited to complete a survey across three distinct phases of the programme. The survey was administered to capture the students’ experiences and perceptions at each stage. Out of the 16 Brazilian students, responses were received from eight students in Phase 1, six students in Phase 2, and seven students in Phase 3. Among the 24 U.S. students, responses were received from 23 students in Phase 1, 17 students in Phase 2, and 16 students in Phase 3 (see Table 6). All surveys that were submitted at each phase were included in the analysis to ensure comprehensive coverage of the respondents’ experiences. Per the ethical approval board, I was not permitted to offer gift cards or monetary incentives for participation, but the course instructors were able to offer extra credit for the completion of the Phase 3 survey.

**Table 6**

*Survey Participation Across Phases*

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Brazilian Students (N = 16)</b>	<b>U.S. Students (N = 24)</b>
<b>Phase 1</b>	8	23

<b>Phase 2</b>	6	17
<b>Phase 3</b>	7	16

Information about the study was shared in several ways. I introduced myself via Zoom during an early virtual exchange session to describe the project to the students. At that time, I also shared a link to the survey in the video conferencing chat. I followed the same process at the end of Phase 2. In Phase 3, I presented the invitation to the students while in person in Brazil and shared the survey link via WhatsApp. Each of the three surveys began with an electronic consent form in English (Appendix E) or Portuguese (Appendix F) authorizing the release of data from the surveys, photo elicitation submissions, and interviews. There was an additional electronic consent form (Appendix G) for students to consent to being part of the on-site observations. The consent process was employed at multiple points during the data collection and gave students the ability to participate in some forms of data collection and not others, thus giving them more autonomy in the process. Because I hold a leadership position and was responsible for many aspects of the programme development, I underscored to the students that their participation in the study is voluntary and will have no impact on future opportunities. This was emphasised in the oral presentation of the project and on the consent forms.

### **Data Storage and Security**

Students' names were redacted from all data at the time at which I took possession of the data. I replaced the students' names with an identifying code to better protect students' anonymity while also allowing for the collation of multiple sources of data produced by the same individual. The key linking students' names to their ID codes has been kept in a password-protected document that is accessible only to the researcher. All data is housed in a secure, cloud-based storage service that meets requirements for confidential and restricted data and

requires multi-factor authentication to access data. The data storage protection system is FIPS 140-2 certified, and each file is encrypted using AES 256-bit encryption. Data will be maintained for three years after the culmination of the research project and will then be destroyed.

To protect the privacy and anonymity of participants, different sets of code names were used in separate chapters of this study. This approach ensures that any identifying details shared by students during interviews or other qualitative activities cannot be linked back to their survey responses since there is no analytical need to connect specific survey responses with interview data. Rather, the two data sources are being compared more holistically. This method further safeguards participant identities by minimizing the possibility of indirect identification through cross-referencing data sources. Throughout the dissertation, code names from the U.S. students begin with “US” and code names from the Brazilian students begin with “BR.” The reporting of detailed descriptive data (e.g. age, race, or ethnicity) is constrained by the need to maintain participant confidentiality. Given the small cohort size, presenting such data in table form could increase the risk of participant identification. Where relevant, demographic information is therefore referenced only as it emerged organically in participants’ narratives and where it was directly pertinent to the analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

This section details the methods by which the data was analysed. It begins with the contextual analysis, then describes the analysis of the quantitative survey data, analysis of the qualitative survey data, and finally analysis of the interviews and photo elicitation.

#### **Contextual Analysis**

As this research employs a case study design, it is essential to provide a detailed description of the context of the study in order to offer thick description and allow for

triangulation. The contextual data described here includes field notes from the programme observations and from my own role in the planning phases of this programme. Because Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEPs) are a newer type of global education programme, providing a thorough and descriptive account of what the programme entailed is essential for the reader's ability to understand the context and interpret the findings and discussion that follow. I briefly describe the development of the programme, I then describe the virtual exchange phase, and end with the in-person phase. A summary of assignments and activities can be found in Appendix H.

### *Description of the Virtual Exchange Phase of the HEP*

The virtual exchange component of the Hybrid Exchange Programme (HEP) was designed to provide students with structured opportunities to engage in collaborative, intercultural, and problem-solving activities within a virtual environment. The programme was developed by a study abroad practitioner in Brazil. It was team-taught by faculty from both the U.S. and Brazil, with Brazilian faculty taking the lead. The exchange was conducted in English and required students to work as consultants for a Brazilian client. The VE took place from February-May 2024 and included students from a large public university in the U.S. and students from several universities across Brazil. It concluded with the in-person component held in Brazil. The structure of the VE, including assignments, readings, and other activities that took place prior to the in-person meeting in Brazil, is outlined in Appendix H. This phase was intentionally designed as a preparatory dimension of the Hybrid Exchange Programme. Many of the skills, relationships, and reflective practices developed during this phase were intended to be further developed during the in-person phase in Brazil, as is discussed in the Findings chapter.

The primary focus of the VE was to collaborate in teams of five-to-seven U.S. and Brazilian students to address a real-world business challenge. The group used Zoom for formal

class activities and employed the open-source version of the Canvas Learning Management System (LMS) for programme announcements, instructor feedback, and for disseminating readings and resources. Students were permitted to use their own methods of communication within their groups, and typically used WhatsApp, email, and social media platforms to communicate.

Due to the alignment of Brazilian and U.S. academic schedules, the U.S. students started meeting as a group approximately one month earlier (late January 2024) and the two groups of students began meeting online as a group after the Carnival holiday (late February 2024). The U.S. students utilised that time to read and discuss Erin Meyer's *The Culture Map* (2014), which describes how to navigate cultural differences through an exploration of how cultures vary across eight dimensions: communication, evaluation, persuasion, leadership, decision-making, trust, disagreement, and scheduling. This was also read by the Brazilian students in advance of the VE. Students used a jigsaw teaching approach, wherein teams were assigned a specific chapter to analyse and explore (Banaruee et al., 2025). Each team then taught the other teams through presentations of their assigned chapter. The Brazilian instructor was also able to meet with the U.S. students face-to-face for an initial class session in January where he gave a lecture introducing the students to the diversity of Brazil in terms of people, geography, and economy as part of a visit to their campus. Additional guest speakers were invited to speak to the students, including a Brazilian sociologist and an American alumna from the U.S. university who had considerable work experience in Brazil.

When the Brazilian students joined online in February, the programme went fully virtual, and the U.S. students no longer met in person. The instructors agreed that having all participants engage from a screen would be more equitable than having the U.S. students together in a

classroom with Brazilians logging on from individual computers or phones. This finding was taken from pilot surveys, shared by the researcher, and presented to the instructors for implementation. The VE portion began with an orientation session that introduced students to the programme structure, learning objectives, and the instructors from both the U.S. and Brazil. A lecture on “Doing Business in Brazil: History, Culture, and Traditions” gave the students a context for the business case by providing an overview of Brazilian history, cultural values, and business practices, ensuring participants were equipped to engage effectively in the activities.

To integrate the teams, instructors led the students in initial icebreakers and opportunities to share more about themselves and their interests. These activities prepared participants for subsequent project-based work and set the tone for the intercultural teamwork that would define their experience.

The programme featured four guest lectures from Brazil and the U.S. as well as thematic sessions that bridged theoretical knowledge with practical application. Notable sessions included a lecture on cultural diversity in virtual teams, which explored the role of intercultural dynamics in project success, and a discussion on social entrepreneurship, which encouraged critical thinking about addressing societal challenges through sustainable business practices. Additional sessions introduced participants to tools such as the Business Canvas Model and methodologies for project planning and execution, project management principles, and strategies for effective storytelling and presentation skills. An additional lecture and activities based on Erin Meyer’s *The Culture Map* further enabled students to analyse cultural differences in business practices.

The centrepiece of the VE was a collaborative business case project wherein students were organised into teams of 5–7 comprising U.S. and Brazilian students. Together, they addressed a business challenge posed by a sustainable fashion company based in Brazil. This

company specialised in creating clothing on demand to eliminate wasteful overstock, using eco-friendly materials and ensuring traceability within their supply chains. The CEO sought insights into the Brazilian and international market, including a detailed market analysis to understand their primary consumer base and identify opportunities for expansion outside of Brazil. One of the key challenges presented to the teams was addressing accessibility—exploring strategies to make the company’s products affordable for the average Brazilian consumer while maintaining its commitment to sustainability.

The project unfolded in structured phases, beginning with the introduction of the business case. Teams worked collaboratively during dedicated sessions and were guided by instructors and business mentors who provided feedback and helped the groups refine their ideas. The process culminated in final presentations, during which teams incorporated mentor feedback and delivered polished, well-researched presentations that proposed innovative yet feasible solutions for the company’s growth and accessibility challenges. Using feedback from the pilot, the instructors determined that the final presentations would take place virtually to make the in-person time in Brazil less stressful. The winning team members were presented with apparel created by the company when they met face-to-face in Brazil.

### ***Description of the In-Person Component of the HEP***

In May 2024, the U.S. students travelled to Brazil for a ten-day in-person experience in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The Brazilian students also travelled from their homes to these cities. The on-site module began in São Paulo on May 14 with a group lunch wherein the U.S. and Brazilian students met face-to-face for the first time. Next, they had a group orientation session. Students explored the neighbourhood and shared a welcome dinner at a traditional Brazilian steakhouse. Over the next few days, they engaged in a range of academic, cultural, and

professional activities. Examples of company visits include meetings with staff from the cultural magazine *Piauí*, and a visit to *Nude*, a sustainable oat milk producer. These meetings provided insights into Brazilian society and business models. Cultural enrichment was woven throughout the experience, including a *Capoeira* workshop in Ibirapuera Park, a drumming session at Instituto Brincante, and a street art tour in São Paulo's Batman Alley. It was expected that all students would participate in both the company visits and the cultural and recreational activities.

Most students (all the U.S. students and five of the Brazilians) then flew to Rio de Janeiro on May 18, where they continued their cultural and academic immersion. At this point, some of the Brazilian students returned to their home cities to resume classes, but five of the students who attended public universities in Rio remained with the group since their courses were suspended due to a labour strike. Activities in Rio included a guided city tour, visits to companies such as *Parque Tecnológico do Rio*, and engagements with local social impact organisations such as *Patota do Galo* youth arts camp. The experience culminated with a visit to Christ the Redeemer/*Cristo Redentor* and Sugarloaf/*Pão de Açúcar*, and a farewell dinner at a traditional Brazilian restaurant on May 23. An outline of these activities is found in Appendix H. These activities were intended to build directly on the collaborative work that started in the VE period.

### Survey

All participants were invited to take part in a survey in three phases over the course of the programme: during Phase 1 (before the start of the programme), Phase 2 (just after the VE ended and before the students met in person), and Phase 3 (after the conclusion of the programme). By administering similar questions across three phases, the survey aims to capture how participants' perceptions evolve. It also allows for comparisons between U.S. and Brazilian students.

Because Hybrid Exchange Programmes are a newer form of programming, I relied on surveys created for study abroad students. It includes questions developed by Anderson and Lawton (2015), Dwyer (2004), and Mohajeri Norris and Dwyer (2005). It is supplemented with some additional questions written by the researcher. The questions and their sources can be found in Appendices A, B, and C.

The first phase, conducted before the VE began, asks participants to *anticipate* how the experience influences their personal growth, intercultural understanding, and professional skills, setting a baseline for their expectations. The second phase, administered at the end of the VE but before the in-person meeting in Brazil, assesses the initial impact of the VE, allowing participants to reflect on the changes they have noticed after the virtual component. The third phase, conducted after the students met in person in Brazil and the programme concluded, asks participants to evaluate the overall impact of both the VE and in-person experiences.

In the first administration of the survey, the questions use a Likert scale previously published by Anderson and Lawton (2015) which asked: How important is each of the following in motivating you to participate in this study abroad programme? 1: Not at all important; 2: Slightly important; 3: Important; 4: Very important; 5 Absolutely essential. Some of the questions were modified slightly so that the verb tense would make sense in the context. The original wording is contained in brackets in Appendix A. At the end of the VE, students were asked to repeat the survey they had taken prior to the VE experience. The original wording for the questions is contained in the appendices. Phase 1 can be found in Appendix A, Phase 2 can be found in Appendix B, and Phase 3 can be found in Appendix C.

The survey by Anderson and Lawton (2015) has been used regularly in the literature with over 20 surveys published, and with 10 of those occurring from 2023 to present, showing that it

remains widely utilised. One question was taken from Dwyer (2004), and while this survey is no longer widely used, it was relevant to this study where I was interested in understanding the impact of the experience on students’ careers. Finally, Mohajeri Norris and Dwyer (2005) continue to be relevant with 24 citations from 2023–present. In summary, while these survey questions are less recent, they reflect enduring concerns with student learning and development that remain relevant at present, in both in-person and online contexts.

**Analysis of Quantitative Survey Data**

This subsection on analysis of survey data includes a discussion of the quantitative survey data. All students enrolled in the Hybrid Exchange Programme, totalling 40 participants, were invited to complete a survey across three distinct phases of the programme. Table 7 shows the response rate.

**Table 7**

*Survey Participation Across Phases*

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Brazilian Students (N = 16)</b>	<b>U.S. Students (N = 24)</b>
<b>Phase 1</b>	8	23
<b>Phase 2</b>	6	17
<b>Phase 3</b>	7	16

All surveys that were received at each phase were included in the analysis to ensure comprehensive coverage of the respondents’ experiences. I generated descriptive statistics from each imputed dataset (Enders, 2022). After that, I employed the Mann-Whitney *U* test to test for statistically significant differences between the pooled responses from the U.S. students and Brazilian students at each of the three phases (Nachar, 2008).

### *Missing Data*

Given the small sample size of 40 participants and the importance of capturing each individual's unique perspective, I chose not to delete incomplete data, as doing so could risk losing valuable insights. Instead, I employed Multiple Imputation (MI) to handle missing responses while preserving the integrity of participants' voices in the analysis. MI offers a more robust alternative to data analysis than methods like complete-case analysis, listwise deletion, or mean imputation (Enders, 2022). Deletion methods such as listwise deletion and pairwise deletion "reduce power and require an unsystematic MCAR [Missing Completely At Random] mechanism where missingness is unrelated to the data (Enders, 2022, p. 24). Mean imputation, in which the missing values for a variable are filled in with the average of completed scores, can "distort parameter estimates" (Enders, 2022, p. 25). In contrast, by generating five imputed datasets using Multiple Imputation, I was able to account for uncertainty associated with missing data while reducing biases created by eliminating incomplete datasets.

Before comparing the quantitative data across time and cohort, I tested whether the missing data followed a pattern that would bias the results of Multiple Imputation if it were to be utilised inappropriately. Using Little's MCAR test, I found that the data were Missing Completely at Random, which indicates that the missing responses were not related to the participants' characteristics or responses. This was supported by the test's p-value of 0.272, which is above the commonly used threshold of 0.05, suggesting that the missingness was random and not systematic. Because this condition was met, I was able to use Multiple Imputation (MI) to fill in the missing data. MI generates several complete versions of the dataset by estimating the missing values based on patterns in the available data. Following recommendations in the literature, I created five imputed datasets, which is generally considered

sufficient for robust analysis (Rubin, 1987; Twisk, 2023). These five datasets were then combined (or “pooled”) into one overall set of results using standard statistical procedures (Enders, 2022).

### ***Comparison of Survey Responses Between U.S. and Brazilian Student Cohorts***

The quantitative analysis compared the responses from the surveys between the U.S. and Brazilian students. To do this, I employed the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test, a non-parametric test, to identify statistically significant differences between the U.S. and Brazilian students in their responses to each survey question at each of the three phases of the survey. The Mann-Whitney  $U$  test was selected because the groups are not normally distributed (Nachar, 2008). The Shapiro Wilk test for normality was run in SPSS. The Shapiro-Wilk statistic is 0.613, and the  $p$ -value is also less than 0.001. Results confirm the rejection of the null hypothesis of normality, which indicates that the data significantly deviates from a normal distribution and the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test is appropriate.

For the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test, a  $p$ -value of less than 0.05 was used as the threshold for statistical significance. The dependent variable (Likert scale response) was measured at the ordinal level. The students’ nationalities (U.S. or Brazilian) are the independent variable. The data meets the requirements for the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test in that the dependent variable can be measured at the ordinal level, the independent variables consist of two categorical, independent groups, there is no relationship between the observations between the independent variables, and finally, the groups are not normally distributed (Laerd Statistics, 2020).

For each of the three phases, I compared the U.S. students’ scores to the Brazilian students’ scores for each survey question. I used Mann-Whitney  $U$  tests in SPSS and highlighted the questions for which the null hypothesis was rejected. This allowed for easier visualisation of




the areas of difference between the two groups. Further, by organising the survey responses by theme rather than following the original survey order, I was able to visualise trends within each of the major topics: personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth.

***Comparisons of Scores over Time***

In order to visualise the changes over time, I added a sparkline to each question showing Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3. Tufte (2006) defines sparklines as “wordlike graphics, with an intensity of visual distinctions comparable to words and letters” (p. 48). These can be helpful in comparing changes over time and visualising trends (Tufte, 2006). Using these visuals, I was able to systematically explore trends in the pooled data across the three phases at both the individual level and the cohort level. Table 8 provides an illustration of the sparklines (to the right of the table) with the three trends observed. The three trends are a straight line going up, a straight line going down, and a V-shape, indicating that students had not yet met their initial expectations by the end of the VE, but they had by the end of the full programme.

**Table 8**

*Sparkline Labels*

<b>Sparkline Label</b>	
For "Ascender," P1 is lowest, P2 is in the middle, and P3 is highest. Ex:	
For "Check Marks," P2 is lower than P1 and P3. Ex:	
For "Descenders," P1 is highest, P2 is in the middle, and P3 is lowest. Ex:	

**Analysis of Qualitative Survey Data**

I employed several strategies to interpret the open-ended survey data, including sentiment analysis (Clavel-Arroitia, 2025; Liu, 2012), structural coding (Saldaña, 2016), and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016). Across the three phases, students provided 448 short answers to the

survey questions. I utilised Atlas.ti as a tool for coding. I represent frequency of codes by using groundedness (Gr). This refers to the number of times a particular code appeared in the dataset. This metric is drawn from the coding process in Atlas.ti and is used throughout the findings section to indicate the frequency of a given code or theme.

### *Sentiment Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Responses*

I began with sentiment analysis to read through my data and to explore students' sentiments across Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3. I followed Liu (2012) who defines sentiment analysis as the analysis of "people's opinions, sentiments, appraisals, attitudes, and emotions toward entities and their attributes expressed in written text (p. 1)." I assigned each sentence a code of positive, negative or neutral based on the tone conveyed. In most instances, I assigned a single code, however, in some complex cases, I assigned different codes to different parts of a single sentence. For instance, in the response, "I think my confidence will go up, but I am also afraid I won't do well enough," I coded the first part with a positive attribute and the second part with a negative attribute. I completed one initial round of coding and then reviewed all positive codes, all negative codes, and all neutral codes to ensure consistency and make refinements. Combining these with structural codes—discussed in the next section—allowed me to explore changes in sentiment across phases and by students' country of origin and to triangulate these with the quantitative data.

### *Coding of Open-Ended Survey Responses*

In coding the data, I began with attribute codes and structural codes and culminated by adding inductive codes (Saldaña, 2016). I utilised structural codes to organise the students' responses to the questions asked. I used attribute codes to indicate the phase of the survey (1, 2, or 3) as well as the nationality of the student (U.S. or Brazilian). As part of the inductive coding,

I conducted three full rounds of coding and then focused on refinement. The first and second round yielded 634 codes which were refined to 115 inductive codes in the second and third rounds by merging similar codes. Some codes and categories were renamed over time and eliminated if found to be inconsequential or repetitive (Saldaña, 2016, p. 234). I also ensured that they passed Saldaña's "touch test." He asks, "Can you physically touch what they represent? If so, then explore how those codes and categories can be reworded and transformed into more abstract meanings to transcend the particulars of your study" (2016, pp. 266–267).

Structural coding (Saldaña, 2016) was an essential tool for organising the students' responses to the open-ended survey questions. Attribute coding allowed me to categorise data by country and phase. It also allowed me to generate lists of topics based on the survey questions. The open-ended survey data included answers to questions like, "What were some of the challenges of participating in this programme?" As such, obtaining a list of such challenges and understanding the groundedness of these challenges was an essential part of the analysis. Assigning the attribute codes allowed for comparisons between groups and across phases. It also enabled me to more easily summarize students' responses in order to understand trends and identify outliers.

### **Analysis of Interviews**

I used analytic memoing and coding (Saldaña, 2016) to analyse the interviews. The semi-structured interview questions can be found in Appendix D. I conducted the interviews with 14 out of the 24 U.S. students and 9 out of the 16 Brazilian students. This occurred between June 5–July 15, 2024, which was between two-to-six weeks after the end of the programme in Brazil. These interviews, conducted over the Zoom video conference platform, were typically 30–45

minutes in length and yielded approximately 14 hours of audio recording and 130,000 words when transcribed.

### *Analytic Memoing of Interviews*

In order to keep this large volume of data organised, I wrote analytic memos immediately after each interview and then again after transcribing the interview. Saldaña writes that “Analytic memos are somewhat comparable to researcher journal entries or blogs – a place to ‘dump your brain’ about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more about them” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 44). My initial analytic memos contained overall impressions, surprises, and connections to other interviews or survey findings. After transcribing the interviews, I also highlighted key quotations that I found to be significant in terms of contradicting or aligning with sentiments that other students had expressed or providing new insights into the research questions.

### *Coding of Interviews*

The next step was to code the transcripts. I coded them in Atlas.ti. The first and second round codes are a combination of in vivo codes and other inductive codes, but the final set of codes and categories consisted of in vivo codes with my own short descriptor added to each in vivo code. For instance, the in vivo code “The Online Part Was Really Important” was prefaced by my own short descriptor “VE Impact.” I used an iterative process that began with 154 codes under 13 categories that were distilled into 23 codes under 7 categories via multiple coding cycles. As with the survey coding, codes and categories were renamed over time and eliminated if found to be inconsequential or repetitive (Saldaña, 2016, p. 234). Again, I employed Saldaña’s “touch test,” using codes that represent abstract ideas that cannot be physically touched (2016, pp. 266–267). Ultimately, the themes and categories were also used to compare the transcripts of

the U.S. and Brazilian students, with code frequencies used as a comparative tool. As such, I utilised attribute codes for country of origin and phase of research. Organising the data into both themes and categories in this way allowed me to create “categories of categories” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 278). Saldaña writes that this is the phase at which “a level of abstraction occurs which transcends the particulars of a study, enabling generalizable transfer to other comparable contexts” (2016, p. 278).

### *Coding of Photo Elicitation*

As part of the semi-structured interviews, I incorporated a photo elicitation prompt. Before the interviews took place, students were asked to find a picture or a screenshot that “represents a moment of cultural immersion or cultural learning that took place during the programme.” The rationale behind the prompt comes from the idea of “critical learning incidents,” which Soini (2012) describes as “learning situations which learners have experienced as effective, exceptional, or personally meaningful” (Soini, 2012, p. 846). Integrating photo elicitation enriched the interviews, enabling students to select and share personally meaningful experiences and to make the decision about what to share prior to our meeting, without being influenced by the interview questions. It also helped the students to reconnect with the mindset they had during the programme, effectively mitigating the challenges of conducting interviews via Zoom weeks after the programme had concluded.

I coded the photos to more easily understand who or what was included in the photo, and what kind of event or activity was depicted. I categorised by “participants,” using a code for a group of Brazilian students, for a group of U.S. students, or for a group of both Brazilian and U.S. students, for example. I indicated whether the photo was of a landmark, social event, or group activity. I also indicated whether the photo took place as part of the formal programme or

during free time and whether it included a musical element. Following the coding of the photos, I revisited the interview transcripts to explore how the themes identified by the students are represented visually. I selectively paired the photo-elicited images with corresponding themes from the interviews to provide a richer context beyond the interview transcript alone. To preserve participant privacy, photos are described but not reproduced in this document.

### **Triangulation**

In analysing the data, I triangulate methods as well as data sources. Flick (2018) defines triangulation as such:

Triangulation means that researchers take different perspectives on an issue under study or—more generally speaking—in answering research questions. These perspectives can be substantiated by using several methods and/or in several theoretical approaches. Both are, or should be, linked. Furthermore, it refers to combining different types of data on the background of the theoretical perspectives, which are applied to the data (Flick, 2018, p. 788).

Flick goes on to explain that triangulation should enhance the quality of research by producing knowledge “on different levels” wherein the outcomes exceed that which would be generated by using only one approach (p. 789). By integrating multiple methods and multiple sources of data, I have been able to create a deeper and more insightful illustration of the Hybrid Exchange Programme.

### **Trustworthiness**

In mixed-methods research, trustworthiness is a unifying concept that bridges qualitative and quantitative paradigms to ensure the rigor of both approaches. The following section provides an overview of the ways in which constructs related to trustworthiness are woven into

this research. It includes the quantitative concepts of generalisability, internal validity, objectivity, reliability/reproducibility, and their qualitative counterparts: transferability, credibility, confirmability, dependability (Given & Saumure, 2008, pp. 895–896).

### *Quantitative Generalisability*

The quantitative concept of generalisability refers to the capability of a study to be generalised in a larger context through the use of careful sampling and analysis (Given & Saumure, 2008). In this study, generalisability has been addressed through the careful design of survey questions to align the with research objectives. The utilisation of previously validated surveys as well as pilot testing of the instrument used further enhances the study's generalisability (Given & Saumure, 2008).

### *Quantitative Validity*

The survey questions (drawn from Dwyer (2004), Mohajeri Norris and Dwyer (2005), and Anderson and Lawton (2015) come from surveys that are well-established in international education literature. Dwyer (2004) provides a tool for assessing understanding longitudinal trends in areas that include academic, intercultural, professional, and personal growth. Mohajeri Norris and Dwyer (2005) explore the relationship between programmatic attributes (like housing or programme duration) and outcomes. Finally, Anderson and Lawton's (2015) survey complements this by exploring students' pre-participation motivations. I refined the questions, combined them to better address my research questions, and then piloted them with a sample representative of the study population. This maintained the reliability of the original surveys but also allowed me to better align the questions to fit the unique context of the Hybrid Exchange Programme (Given & Saumure, 2008).

### *Quantitative Objectivity*

My statistical analyses were reviewed by researchers with expertise in data analysis and research methodology who specialised in statistics and had familiarity with the data-analysis tools I utilised. Both are affiliated with the University of Illinois's data analytics centre. Additionally, my survey questions were reviewed by my dissertation supervisors, experienced scholars with strong publication records. I shared preliminary findings at multiple international conferences and research seminars to further validate the approach (Given & Saumure, 2008).

### *Quantitative Reliability*

This study achieves reliability by using prompts and questions that have appeared in other studies and by utilising a pilot study (Watson et al., 2007; Kim, 2010). Detailed accounts of the data collection and analysis allow for further transparency and offer the potential for reproducibility (Given & Saumure, 2008).

### *Qualitative Transferability*

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe “transferability” as a useful way of bringing the concept of generalizability into the qualitative realm (p. 254). Lincoln and Guba underscore the need for providing “sufficient descriptive data” to enable transferability, as researchers cannot predict how others will want to utilise their work (p. 298, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 254). Given the narrow scope of the focus of this research, I aim to provide transferability through thick description in the findings and analysis (Given & Saumure, 2008).

### *Qualitative Credibility*

Credibility was also established through triangulation of data from interviews, observation field notes (Spradley, 1980) and analytic memoing (Saldaña, 2016). Member

checking with a sample of participants helped to minimise researcher bias in interpreting the data (Given & Saumure, 2008).

### ***Qualitative Confirmability***

Given and Saumure (2008) write that the qualitative concept of confirmability, “reflects the need to ensure that the interpretations and findings match the data. That is, no claims are made that cannot be supported by the data” (p. 895). This was achieved by grounding findings in the data. I utilised analytic memoing (Saldaña, 2016) and field notes (Spradley, 1980).

### ***Qualitative Dependability***

Qualitative dependability involves the researcher laying out a carefully detailed account of the data collection and analysis so that, under similar conditions, another researcher would create a similar account of the phenomenon under study (Given & Saumure, 2008, p. 896). I have accomplished this through keeping careful records of data collection, coding, and analysis.

### ***Trustworthiness Summary***

This mixed-methods research required that quantitative constructs including generalisability, internal validity, objectivity, reliability/reproducibility, work in tandem with qualitative constructs including transferability, credibility, confirmability, dependability. For Morse, trustworthiness can be tied to the ability to feel confident enough to take action based on the level of rigor applied the data collection and analysis (Morse, 2018, p. 1400). As a scholar-practitioner, the concept of trustworthiness, when presented in this way, is foundational to my work since it bridges the gap between scholarship and practical application. This definition aligns closely with my commitment to conduct research that both advances collective understanding of educational practices while also providing concrete findings for practitioners like me to draw from to enhance programme design and policy development.

### Limitations

This study has four limitations. One is that the U.S. students all come from the same institution. While this functions as a control for variability, it may make it difficult to apply to other contexts, for instance, outside of business studies or at a different type of higher education institution. The duration of the study is only one semester and that allows the study to measure only the short-term impact of the Hybrid Global Experience rather than looking at the impact months or years later, which limits our understanding of whether impacts described are sustained over time.

The differences between the student groups also present some limitations. There were twice as many U.S. students as Brazilian students. This may have impacted group dynamics. Additionally, the U.S. students were participating in this programme for credit whereas the Brazilian students were not. Finally, most of the U.S. students were working and responding to research questions in their native language whereas the Brazilians were doing so in a second or third language. This may have impacted their comfort in expressing ideas or may have led to frustrations in expressing their viewpoints.

Another limitation is that some of the data is self-reported. This is the nature of much data on student experience, and it can be overcome to some extent through the use of triangulation of data and triangulation of methods. Another limitation is that I held a leadership role within the programme and was responsible for some pre-departure logistics and on-site operations. While I was not the primary programme leader and did not assign grades, I was responsible for student well-being and other logistics throughout the programme in Brazil. To minimise potential influence on students' participation in my research, I introduced myself primarily as a PhD student and emphasised that participation was voluntary and unrelated to

grades or future opportunities. This distinction aimed to maintain a clear boundary between my operational and research roles.

Earlier in this dissertation, I described my insider-outsider positionality primarily as a limitation, especially because I conducted some of the research in an unfamiliar geographic and linguistic context. After working through the data and analysis, however, I have come to understand this positionality as an asset as well. Being an outsider required both collaboration and cultural humility, and it also enabled me to engage with the anthropological maxim “to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange.” Comparative studies like this one often rely on researchers who occupy some outsider positionalities. These outsider perspectives can be limitations, but they can also offer useful analytic distance. This insider-outsider positionality is therefore both a limitation and an asset. In this case, it has enabled me to draw comparisons across contexts even as I remain mindful of the interpretive limits of my own positionality.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

The findings section is organised by the four research questions. I elected to organise my findings this way because there is very little overlap among these exploratory questions, and it makes more sense to discuss each separately before bringing the findings together.

**RQ 1:** How do students' perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme?

**RQ 2:** What challenges do students encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context?

**RQ 3:** How does the programme design support student belonging, and in what ways do students exercise agency in creating their own connections?

**RQ 4:** How does participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes differentially benefit U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by U.S. and Brazilian students?

I utilised convergent parallel design and transformative design from Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), to gather complementary quantitative and qualitative data to address the research questions. The convergent mixed methods design draws on the unique strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods while also compensating for the limits of choosing a single method. The purpose of this approach is to triangulate the findings by comparing and contrasting quantitative results with qualitative findings to corroborate and validate the overall findings, in line with Wolcott (2009). After each RQ is presented, the survey data is discussed, followed by the interview data. This organisational strategy aligns with the timeline of the data collection with the three surveys administered first, followed by the interviews and photo elicitation shortly after the programme had ended. The RQs loosely follow the temporal organisation of the

programme, starting with students' anticipated outcomes in RQ 1, moving into the experience of the VE in RQ 2, to the in-person in RQ 3 and finally reflecting the programme's overall impact in RQ 4.

### **Summaries of Key Data**

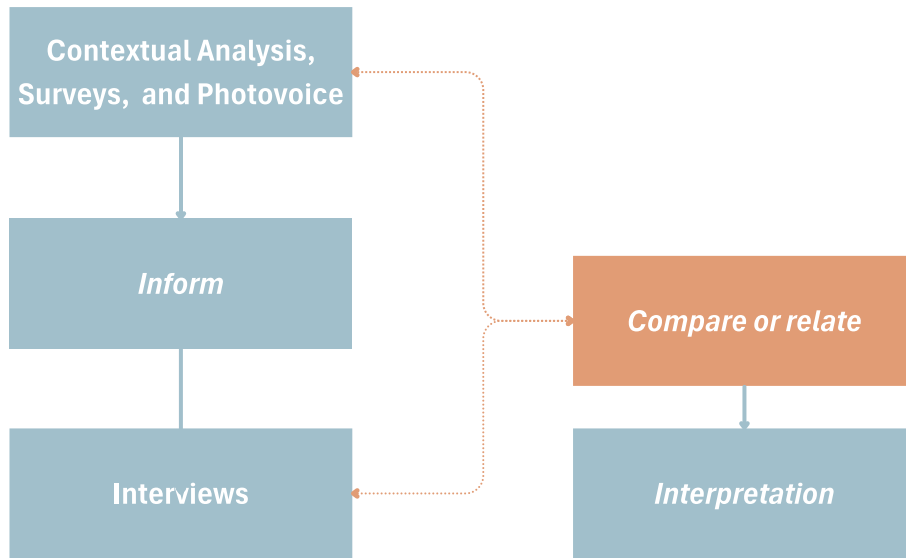
To help guide the reader, key findings presented in this chapter are grounded in two primary data sources: survey responses and interview and photo elicitation coding:

- The primary sources of quantitative data include the pooled average scores from students' survey responses across the three phases of the program: Phase 1 (pre-programme), Phase 2 (post-virtual exchange), and Phase 3 (post-programme).
- The primary sources of qualitative data include the key themes and categories that emerged from the qualitative coding of interview transcripts and from the photo elicitation submissions.

Detailed explanations of the data collection and analysis processes are in the Methods chapter, with specific details provided in the data analysis section. Figure 12 shows a simplified summary of the convergent parallel and transformative research design described in Chapter 4. This shows how the contextual analysis, surveys, and the photo elicitation informed the questions asked during the interviews.

**Figure 12**

*Summary of Convergent Parallel and Transformative Designs*



After the interviews, all sources of data were compared or related and finally interpreted. The subsequent sections of the Findings chapter explore the four research questions using this quantitative and qualitative data as a framing tool.

### **Students’ Evolving Perceptions**

This section uses quantitative survey data and qualitative interview transcripts to answer RQ 1, related to student perceptions of their experiences on the programme:

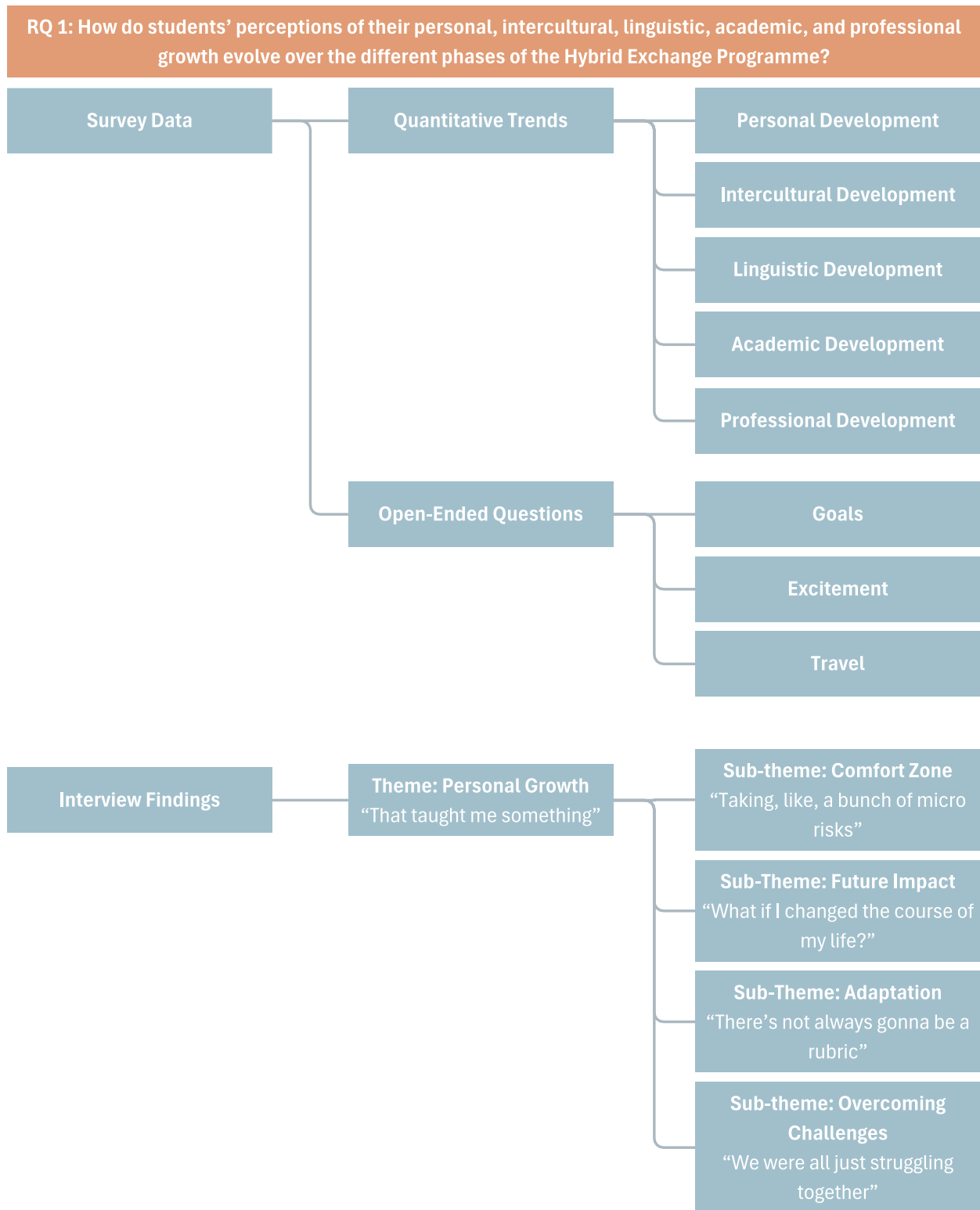
**RQ 1:** How do students’ perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme?

The qualitative data show students’ descriptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth to create a more nuanced understanding of how students experienced these domains. Figure 13 shows the major areas of focus from the survey data and interview findings that are discussed in relation to RQ 1. To help the reader understand the inter-

connections between the different findings, Figure 13 provides an outline. Starting on the left side, the two major data sources are shown: survey data and interview findings. The survey data is comprised of quantitative trends related to personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional development. It also includes responses to open-ended questions related to the themes of goals, excitement, and travel. The interview findings explore the theme of “personal growth” and the four categories related to it.

**Figure 13**

*Overview of Data for RQ 1*

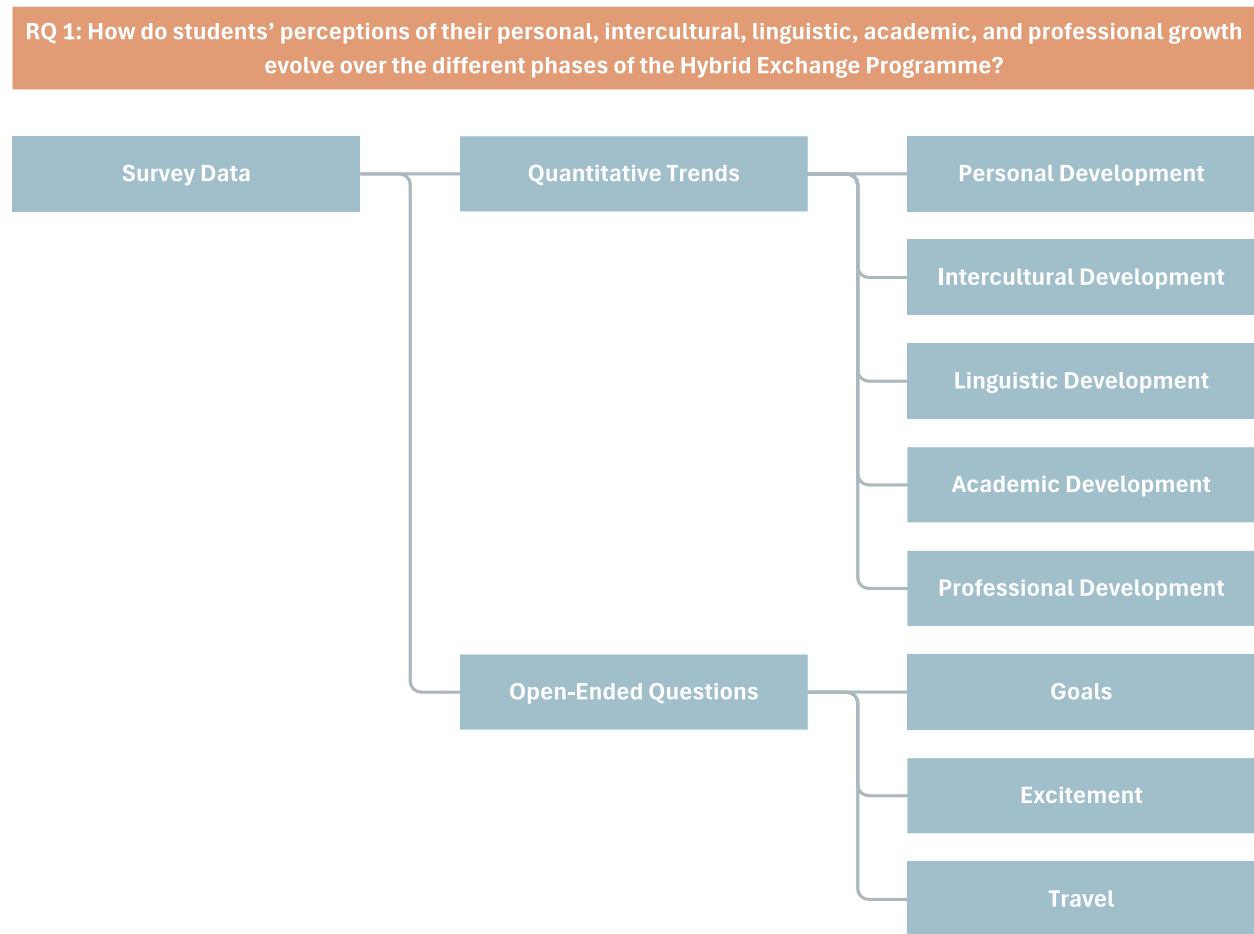


### **Quantitative Survey Data Supporting RQ 1**

Participants were invited to take part in a survey at three phases: in Phase 1 (before the start of the programme), Phase 2 (just after the VE ended), and Phase 3 (after the conclusion of the programme). The quantitative survey includes questions developed by Anderson and Lawton (2015), Mohajeri Norris and Dwyer (2005), and Dwyer (2004). It is supplemented with additional questions written by the researcher. The questions and their sources for Phase 1 can be found in Appendix A, Phase 2 can be found in Appendix B, and Phase 3 can be found in Appendix C. This subsection follows the areas of focus found in Figure 13. Figure 14 revisits the overview of data used for RQ 1 and highlights the areas of focus for this subsection that focuses specifically on survey data related to RQ 1.

**Figure 14**

*Overview of Data for RQ 1 Highlighting Quantitative Survey Data*



***Survey Structure and Themes for RQ 1***

I structured the survey in three phases to capture changes in participants' perspectives of their skills across distinct stages of a virtual exchange (VE) and in-person programme. The first phase, conducted before the VE began, asks participants to *anticipate* how the experience will influence their personal growth, intercultural understanding, and professional skills, setting a baseline for their expectations. The second phase, administered at the end of the VE, asks students to assess the initial impacts, allowing participants to *reflect* on the changes they have noticed after the VE component. The third phase, conducted after the students met in person in

Brazil and the programme had concluded, asks participants to *evaluate* the overall impact of both the VE and in-person experiences.

For the quantitative analysis of the surveys, I utilised Multiple Imputation (MI) to address missing data, thus allowing me to maintain all the survey data that students submitted. The findings of the quantitative survey dataset are made up of the pooled averages of the MI data for all students for each question at Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3. I first reorganised the questions into thematic categories to make trends in the data more visible (see Table 9). Thus, rather than presenting the data in the order in which questions appeared on the survey, the questions have been clustered into five themes to make trends easier to interpret. The first theme, *Personal Development* (highlighted in beige), includes questions on maturity, self-confidence, independence, and self-knowledge. The second theme, *Intercultural Development* (highlighted in green), covers topics such as effective intercultural interactions, getting to know people from different backgrounds, expanded worldview, knowledge of global affairs, understanding different cultures and personal biases, tolerance for ambiguity, and cross-cultural communication skills. The third theme, *Linguistic Development* category (highlighted in orange) focuses on foreign language skills. The fourth theme, *Academic Development* section (highlighted in blue) includes questions about the impact of faculty and knowledge gained in the chosen field of study. The fifth theme, *Professional Development* (highlighted in red) encompasses questions on employment prospects, career skills development, establishing professional contacts, and gaining an international career perspective.

For RQ 1, findings explored trends among the full cohort of U.S. and Brazilian students focusing more on changes between Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 rather than between groups. A

more in-depth look at the ways in which these trends differed among the U.S. and Brazilian student cohorts will be addressed in RQ 4.

### **Overall Findings in Quantitative Data Related to RQ 1**

The average responses for the American and Brazilian students showed a V-shaped pattern with higher scores in Phase 1 and Phase 3 and lower scores found in Phase 2 for 18/19 survey questions, as can be seen in Table 9. This indicates that by Phase 2, students had not yet met the expectations they set for their participation when they first filled out the survey in Phase 1. It shows that in almost all cases, expectations were met or exceeded in Phase 3.

**Table 9**

*Summary of Quantitative Survey Responses Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3 All Students*

Area	Question Topic:	P1 AVG	P2 AVG	P3 AVG	Trendline
Personal Development	Maturity	3.72	3.56	4.12	
	Self-Confidence	3.37	3.32	3.55	
	Independence	3.58	3.35	3.63	
	Self-Knowledge	4.12	3.57	4.21	
Intercultural Development	Effective IC Interactions	4.29	3.96	4.25	
	Get to Know Different People	4.15	3.76	4.65	
	Expanded Worldview	4.24	3.93	4.45	
	Knowledge of Global Affairs	3.90	3.41	4.10	
	Understand Different Cultures	4.21	3.80	4.32	
	Understand Own Biases	3.81	3.78	4.21	
	Tolerance for Ambiguity	3.53	3.51	3.86	
Linguistic Development	Cross-Cultural Com	4.20	3.96	4.13	
Linguistic Development	Language Skills	3.68	2.76	3.38	
Academic Development	Faculty Impact	4.03	3.75	4.15	
	Knowledge of Field of Study	3.46	3.03	3.23	
Professional Development	Employment Prospects	3.59	3.19	3.39	
	Career Skills Development	3.95	3.80	3.90	
	Professional Contacts	3.68	3.34	4.02	
	Int'l Career Perspective	3.96	3.62	3.49	

There was one exception to this trend which was gaining an international perspective on one’s career which showed a descending pattern that peaked in Phase 1 and was lowest in Phase 3.

There were 19 questions and in 12 of these, the scores are highest in Phase 3. What this means is that for the most part, students did not meet their anticipated goals by the end of Phase 2, just after the VE ended. Table 10 shows a summary of areas where student responses across the three phases showed different patterns, including “check marks,” where Phase 1 is in the middle of the three scores, Phase 2 is the lowest, and Phase 3 is the highest (for instance: √). The “descender”

group includes question areas for which Phase 1 is the highest, Phase 2 is in the middle, and Phase 3 is the lowest (for instance: \). These findings highlight the importance of the programme duration and structure, since many gains were not realised until the final phase.

**Table 10**

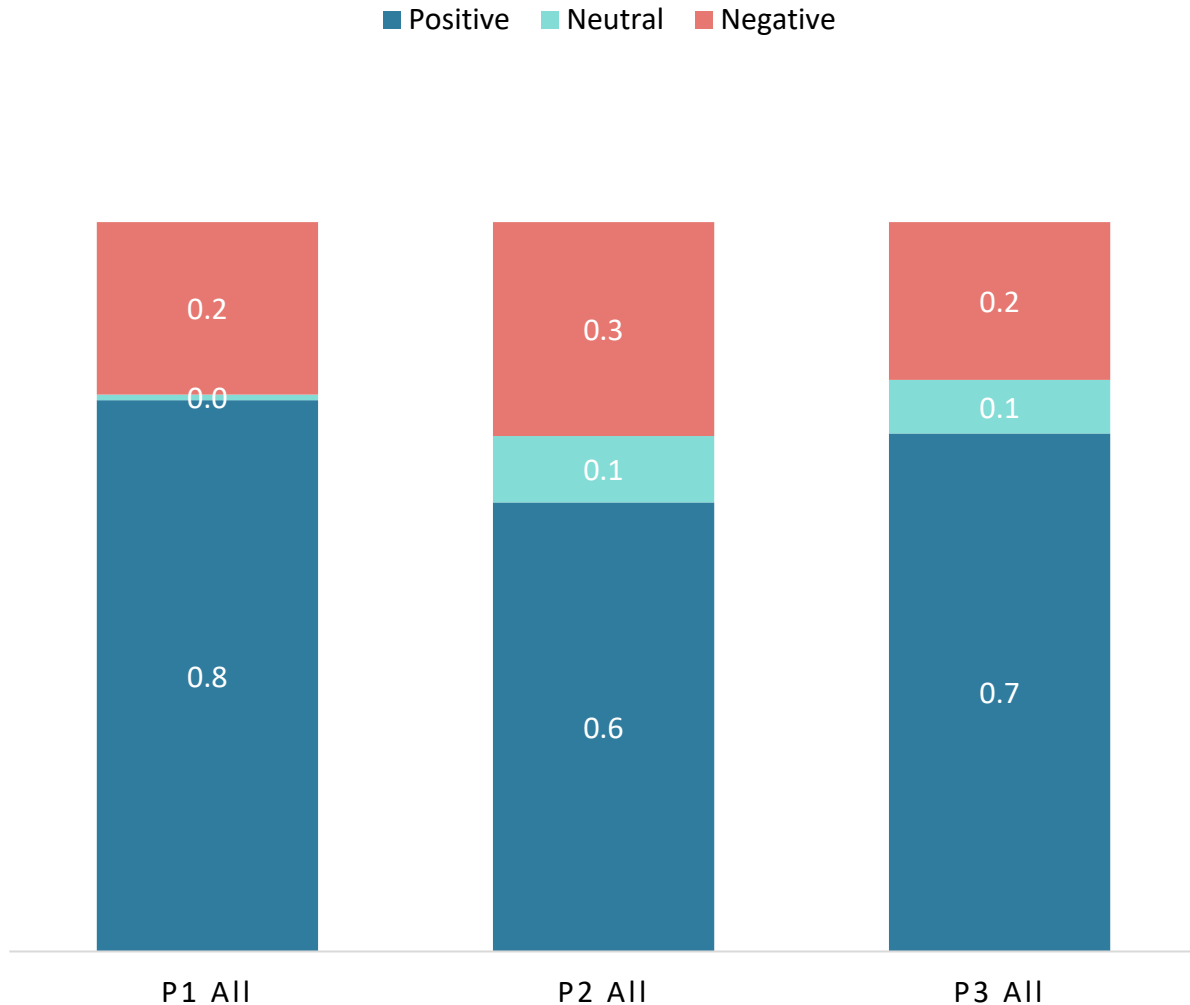
*Check Marks, Rebounders, and Descenders Among All Students*

Trendline	Areas
“Check Mark”	Maturity
	Self-Confidence
	Independence
	Self-Knowledge
	Get to Know Different People
	Expanded Worldview
	Knowledge of Global Affairs
	Understand Different Cultures
	Understand Own Biases
	Tolerance for Ambiguity
	Faculty Impact
	Professional Contacts
	Effective IC Interactions
	Cross-Cultural Com
	Language Skills
	Knowledge of Field of Study
	Employment Prospects
	Career Skills Development
“Descender”	International Career Perspective

As shown in Table 10, among these categorisations, there are 18 that show a check mark pattern and 1 shows a descender pattern. While it is important to understand how the students responded to these questions, further analysis by country of origin in RQ 4 reveals important differences between the ways in which the American and Brazilian students experienced these areas of development. This pattern is mirrored in the sentiment analysis of the open-ended survey data in Figure 15 which is explored in the next section.

**Figure 15**

*Sentiment Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Questions in Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3*



While exploring these trends at the cohort level, I clustered all the Brazilian students and compared them to all the U.S. students. This is a useful strategy since I also wanted to understand the extent to which these trends are visible at the individual level. For each student who completed all three phases, I calculated the mean score for their responses across all 19 survey questions in Phase 1, then made an additional calculation of their mean scores in Phase 2 and completed the process again for Phase 3. I completed the same process for students with

missing data, but I utilised the pooled Multiple Imputation data to calculate each student’s mean response for each of these three phases.

To explore the changes in student survey responses over time, I grouped students based on the patterns in their scores across three phases (Table 11). Specifically, I identified common trendlines, which I label “ascender,” “check mark,” or “descender.” Table 12 provides an overview of the total number of students whose overall average score at Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 exhibited the patterns of ascender, check mark, or descender, alongside a description of that trendline. The chart shows, for instance, that in looking at the average scores across the three phases, U.S. students as a cohort answered three questions showing “ascender” scores, meaning that they started off lower, increased at Phase 2, and peaked in Phase 3.

**Table 11**

*Patterns by Cohort Identified Among 19 Questions over Three Phases*




<b>Sparkline Label</b>	<b># for US</b>	<b># for Brazil</b>
For "Ascender," P1 is lowest, P2 is in the middle, and P3 is highest. Ex: 	3	0
For "Check Marks," P2 is lower than P1 and P3. Ex: 	15	19
For "Descenders," P1 is highest, P2 is in the middle, and P3 is lowest. Ex: 	1	0

Table 12 shifts the focus to individual student scores. In this context, for instance, five U.S. students had “ascender” scores to describe their three phases. These data are not averaged, but rather, each individual student’s trendlines were tracked and recorded.

**Table 12**

*Patterns Identified in Individual Student Scores over Three Phases*

<b>Trendline</b>	<b>U.S. Students</b>	<b>Brazilian Students</b>
“Ascenders”	5	0
“Check Marks”	17	14
“Descenders”	2	2

While this study does not conduct an in-depth analysis of individual students' trajectories, I examined each participant's three-phase trendline to ensure that the group-level findings did not mask individual variation. Categorising students into patterns such as "ascender," "check mark," and "descender," provided a way to verify that the V-shaped pattern observed in the aggregate data was not driven by a few outliers and added depth to the discussion on student scepticism. These trendlines also support the interpretation that student experiences were not the same but broadly followed similar arcs.

### **Open-Ended Survey Data Supporting RQ 1**

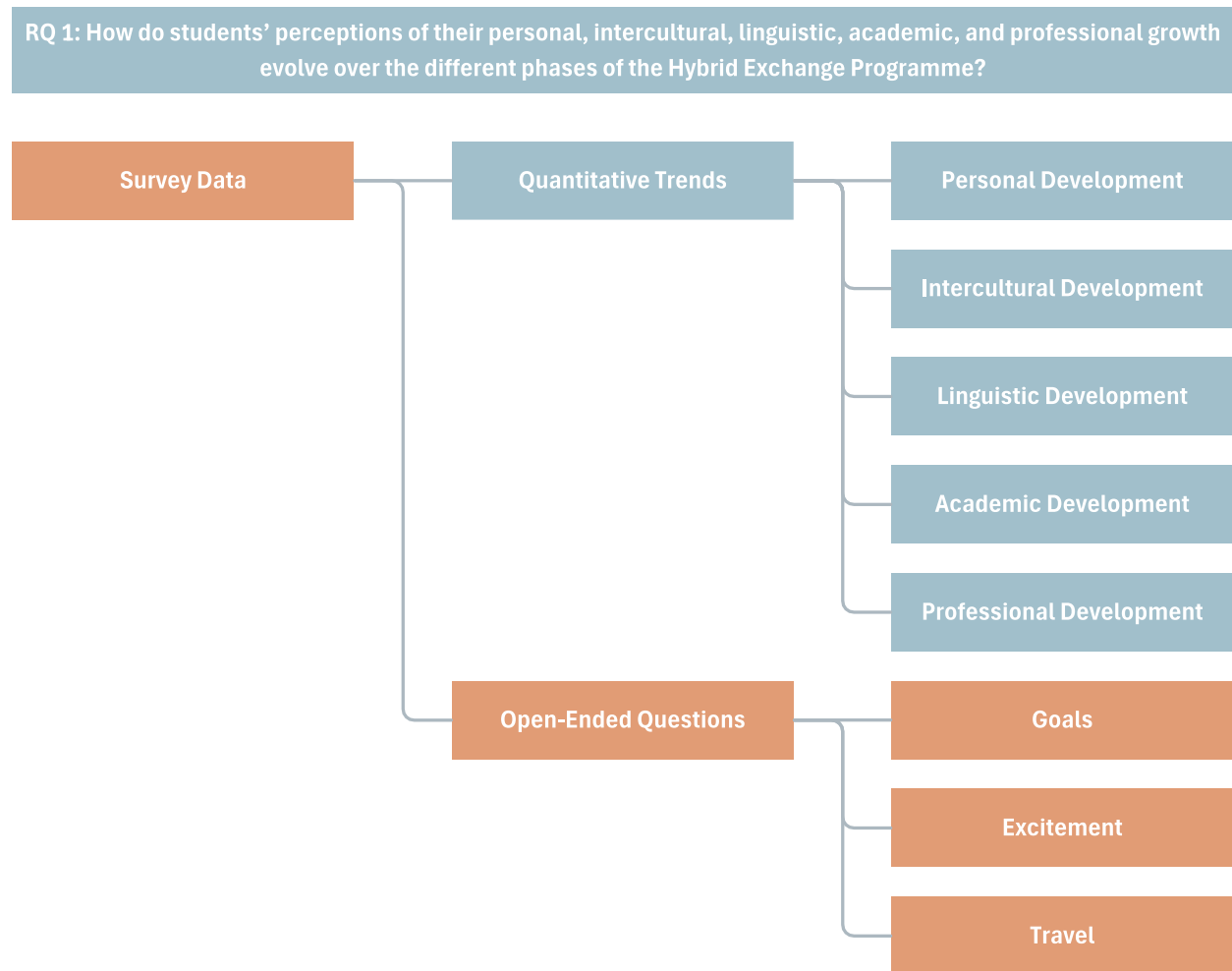
Two open-ended survey questions directly addressed RQ 1, focusing on students' goals and their excitement about participating in the programme. These questions were posed during all three phases of the study, as outlined below:

- What are/were some goals you had for participating in this programme and to what extent do/did you feel that you met these?
- What are/were aspects of the programme that you found most exciting?

Figure 16 shows how the open-ended survey data fits into the overall data used to support RQ 1.

**Figure 16**

*Overview of Data for RQ 1 Highlighting Open-Ended Survey Questions*



These open-ended questions focus on three themes, those of goals, excitement, and travel.

**Goals**

Tracking students' goals across the three phases of the programme enables a clearer understanding about how students' motivations may have shifted throughout their time as participants. Table 13 shows the goals students identified at each phase of the survey. They are listed in descending order by groundedness (Gr) in order to show the frequency with which they occurred and to enable the exploration of patterns and trends. The most prominent themes identified are intercultural development (Gr=43), professional development (Gr=21),

communication (Gr=15), social connection (Gr=15), language skills (Gr=13), stepping out of one’s comfort zone (Gr=13), and teamwork (Gr=12).

**Table 13**

*Student-Identified Goals by Phase*

<b>Goal Area</b>	<b>Phase 1</b>	<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Phase 3</b>	<b>Totals</b>
<b>Intercultural Development</b>	16	13	14	43
<b>Professional Development</b>	7	9	5	21
<b>Communication</b>	8	5	2	15
<b>Social Connection</b>	4	4	7	15
<b>Language Skills</b>	5	4	4	13
<b>Step Out of Comfort Zone</b>	4	2	2	8
<b>Teamwork</b>	8	2	2	12
<b>Academic</b>	2	4	1	7
<b>Personal Development</b>	2	2	3	7
<b>Adaptability</b>	4	0	2	6
<b>General Skills Development</b>	0	2	2	4
<b>Task Accomplishment</b>	0	3	0	3
<b>Time Management</b>	2	0	0	2
<b>Travel</b>	1	0	1	2
<b>Leadership</b>	0	1	0	1
<b>Meeting New People</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>160</b>

**Consistent Goals.** Some goals remain consistent across the three phases of research. For instance, the goal of Intercultural Development saw steady engagement with 16 mentions in Phase 1, 13 in Phase 2, and 14 in Phase 3. Similarly, language skills remained important throughout (Phase 1: five; Phase 2: four; Phase 3: four), representing the sustained interest

among a smaller subset of students in improving their language abilities. Personal development also followed a similar trend (Phase 1: two; Phase 2: two; Phase 3: three). For linguistic goals, eight of the students who listed these are Brazilian students wanting to improve their English skills while five are U.S. students who wanted to begin to learn Portuguese.

**Variability by Phase.** A few goals showed more variability by phase. Three goals peaked during Phase 2, just after the VE concluded. These are “Professional Development” (Phase 1: seven; Phase 2: nine; Phase 3: five), “Academic Development” (Phase 1: two; Phase 2: four; Phase 3: one), and “Task Accomplishment,” which had three references in Phase 2, and none elsewhere. This may suggest that the business case exercise during this period sharpened students’ focus on professional outcomes.

**Declining Goals.** Goals related to “Communications” and “Teamwork” declined after Phase 1. “Communications” showed this pattern: Phase 1: eight; Phase 2: five; Phase 3: two. “Teamwork” showed this pattern: Phase 1: eight; Phase 2: two; Phase 3: two. There seemed to be more anxiety around perceptions of language barriers, which may not have been fully borne out. This is explored further in the “Challenges” section under RQ 2.

**Student Reflections.** Finally, some students reflected on their evolving goals and unexpected personal growth during the programme. One participant shared how her initial objective of building simple connections with Brazilian peers transformed into a more meaningful experience:

One goal I had was to simply just to have meaningful conversations with a few of the Brazilians and get to know them more on a personal level. However, in retrospect I realize i did so much more than have a few conversations. I created many friendships

during my 10 days there that I truly cherish. I got to know these students in a not only a professional setting, but a social one too. (US31, 77:1 ¶ 10)

This reflection highlights how students' goals evolved over time as they moved from VE to the in-person exchange. While students' goals reflect what they hoped or planned to achieve, another forward-looking theme, "excitement" captures the more emotional facet of their journey, the part that sparked enthusiasm for what was to come. This will be explored in the next subsection.

### *Excitement*

Students' descriptions of the aspects of the programme that they were most excited about are summarised in

Table 14 and sorted in descending order by frequency. Three areas stand apart from the others: Meeting New People (Gr=34), Travel (Gr=26), and Meeting in Person (Gr=17). Interestingly, “Making Friends” does not seem to have been something students anticipated in Phase 1, but was mentioned frequently in Phase 3. In the third phase, “Meeting New People” (Gr=34), “Meeting in Person” (Gr=17) and “Making Friends” (Gr=9) are prominently mentioned. Nearly half of the respondents in Phase 1 (10/22) had text coded with one of these three areas. As a whole, this group of codes occurred 22 times in Phase 1, 16 times in Phase 2, and 22 times in Phase 3. Within these three codes, excitement about making friends was mentioned one time in Phase 1, one time in Phase 2, and then jumped to seven times in Phase 3 after the experience in Brazil concluded.

**Table 14**

*Frequencies Related to “Excitement”*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Phase 1</b>	<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Phase 3</b>	<b>Totals</b>
<b>Meeting New People</b>	17	8	9	34
<b>Travel</b>	9	11	6	26
<b>Meeting in Person</b>	4	7	6	17
<b>Intercultural</b>	6	2	2	10
<b>Making Friends</b>	1	1	7	9
<b>Teamwork</b>	5	2	0	7
<b>The Business Case</b>	0	2	1	3
<b>Academics</b>	1	1	0	2
<b>Learning About Brazil</b>	1	0	1	2
<b>Language Improvement</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>Learning (General)</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>Transformation</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>Having Gained Virtual Work Experience</b>	0	0	1	1
<b>Totals</b>	47	34	33	114

Students’ emphasis on meeting new people, meeting in person, and making friends was an unexpected finding for me, since my initial research focus was narrower. While it included aspects related to personal development (e.g. maturity, self-confidence, independence, self-awareness), it did not seek to explore these facets related more to emotional connection and relationship building. As such, additional theories of belonging (Yao, 2015) were required to capture what mattered to students. Viewed through multiple lenses of belonging (Yao, 2015) and discomfort (Mezirow, 1991), findings suggest that the nature of the programme, which necessitated students stepping outside of their comfort zone challenged students but also

propelled them toward creating connections with each other. Yao writes that “The need for belonging is particularly relevant for college students who are thrust into a foreign environment with strangers when they attend college” (2015, p. 8). Yao’s insight, that belonging is experienced more powerfully during moments of uncertainty, showcases the ways in which discomfort and belonging are interrelated throughout students’ experiences on this programme.

### *Travel*

The U.S. students, for whom travel to Brazil was a prominent aspect of this programme, are the only students to list being excited about travel. There are nine occurrences in Phase 1, 11 occurrences in Phase 2, and six occurrences in Phase 3. That may not be a surprising finding, but several of the Brazilian students had to also travel long distances (e.g. Paraíba, 2,500 kilometres away) from other parts of Brazil to meet the group in São Paulo, yet they did not mention travel.

One U.S. student writes:

I am most excited about leaving the country for the first time in my life. Cross-cultural skills are most effectively developed when completely immersed in that culture, so I imagine this experience will be unlike anything else I have ever experienced and will provide me with many useful skills. (US34, 55:3 ¶ 6)

Another student echoed that sentiment about being both excited about travel and also recognising the ways in which it would be different from their previous work online, writing “I’m most excited to be there in Brazil, it has been challenging online and there is a lack of communication. I also can’t wait to actually experience the culture over just [hearing] about it, an online course isn’t enough to really get involved cross culturally” (US48, 54:3 ¶ 12). While responding to the prompt about their excitement, these students also touched on some areas of perceived shortcomings.

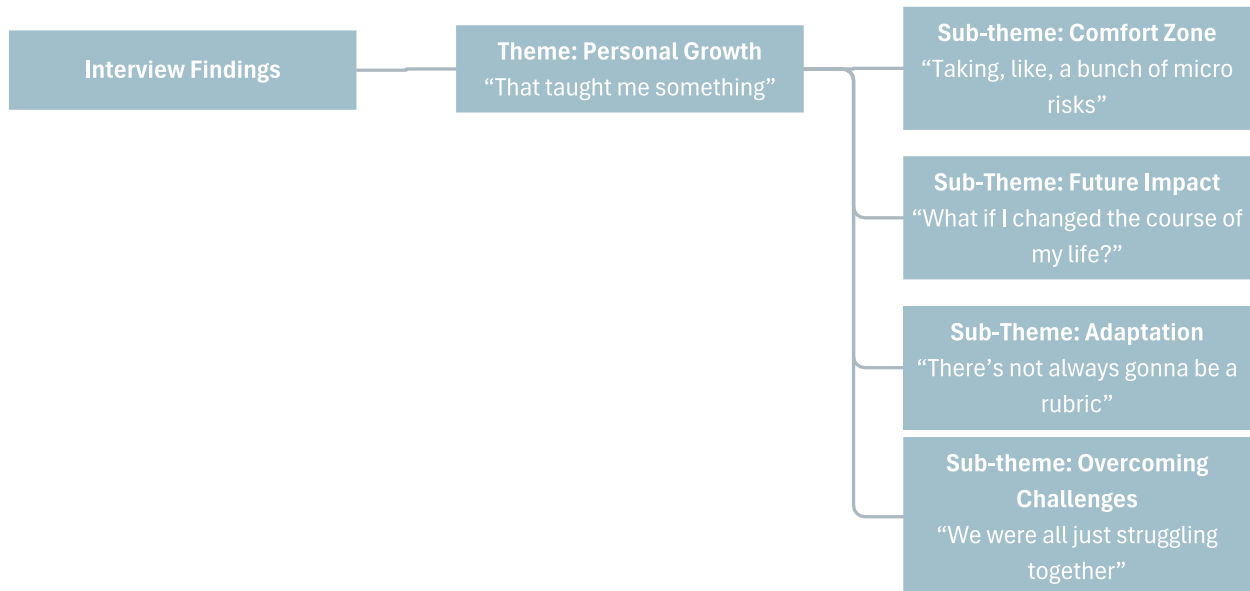
The elements of the programme that students were most excited about—meeting new people, travel, and meeting in person—reflect not only their initial expectations but also the evolution of their perspectives. For instance, “making friends,” was nearly absent in Phase 1, but it emerged prominently in Phase 3, suggesting that the in-person component played an important role in fostering deeper personal and social connections. Similarly, the anticipation and excitement around travel, particularly for the U.S. students, highlight the importance of this form of immersion in fostering their intercultural and personal growth. These survey findings underscore the dynamic nature of student experiences throughout the programme, with the in-person phase providing opportunities for stronger connection and cultural immersion that were not as easily achieved during the VE.

### **Interview Findings to Support RQ 1**

This subsection will explore the interview data that was essential in answering RQ 1. Specifically, coded interview transcripts revealed a prominent theme related to Personal Growth that emerged during the coding process. Figure 17 shows all the data used to support RQ 1 with the parts relevant for this subsection highlighted.

**Figure 17**

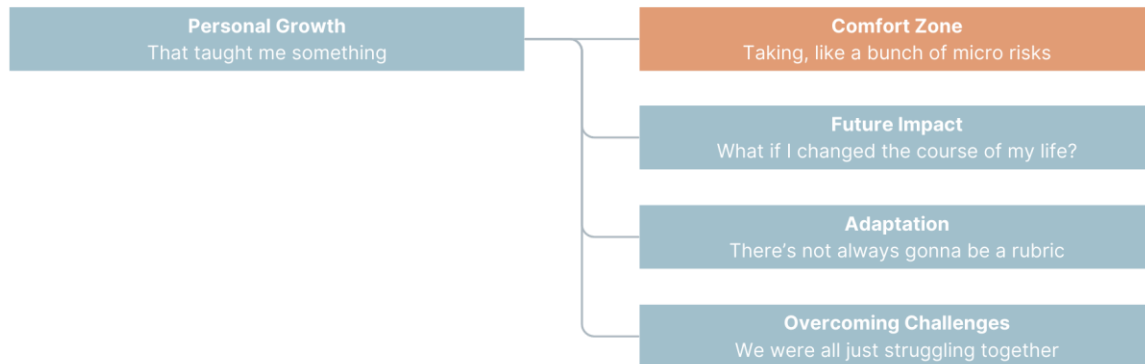
*Overview of Data for RQ 1 Highlighting Interview Findings*



I conducted interviews with 23 students at the conclusion of the programme, which revealed “personal development” as a prominent theme with a groundedness score of 219. To capture students’ perspectives, I used the in vivo code “That taught me something” to represent this theme. Under the broader theme of personal development, four major categories emerged. Figure 18 details these categories and their frequencies across the U.S. and Brazilian transcripts.

**Figure 18**

*Personal Development Themes and Categories from Interviews: Subtheme of Comfort Zone*



In the following subsections, I explore each category, drawing on in vivo codes that reflect students' own words and highlight how their experiences illustrate growth throughout the phases of the HEP.

1. Comfort Zone: Represented by the in vivo code, "Taking, like, a bunch of micro risks."
2. Future Impact: Represented by the in vivo code, "What if I changed the course of my life?"
3. Adaptation: Represented by the in vivo code, "There's not always gonna be a rubric."
4. Overcoming Challenges: Represented by the in vivo code, "We were all just struggling together."

These four areas are explored further in the subsequent sections, with attention paid to the ways in which they shed light on students' growth throughout the phases of the HEP.

### **Theme One: Personal Growth: "That Taught Me Something" (Gr=219)**

Personal growth emerged as a prominent theme throughout the participants' reflections, occurring 219 times across several categories. The theme captures the ways students developed

new skills, adapted to challenges, and gained self-awareness through their experiences. As a whole, these categories show the wide variety of ways in which students grew, not only by moving out of their comfort zones but also by reflecting on their identities, developing independence, and thinking about the future impact of their experiences.

***Subtheme One: Personal Growth: Comfort Zone: “Taking, Like, A Bunch of Micro Risks”***  
***(Gr=55)***

The theme of stepping outside one’s comfort zone emerged prominently in participants’ interviews, capturing the process of personal transformation through small, intentional risks. For many students, the programme provided opportunities to push boundaries in ways they had not previously explored. The in vivo code from a U.S. student’s interview, “Taking, Like, A Bunch of Micro Risks” (Gr=55) reflects how students embraced some amount of uncertainty—whether navigating unfamiliar cities, engaging with new peers, or trying activities for the first time. One student reflected on how the independence he experienced and the exploration he undertook felt like taking “micro risks”:

I often, I’m not really, like a super adventurous person. I think putting myself in situations like, I think the supervision on the trip was so interesting that, like, it would be like, “Oh, you guys can go out alone, like, and like, kind of navigate the city, like, in a safe manner, obviously, but it really gave us a lot of freedom to kind of just see what there is out there and go to like, random, like, random places or random shops and see what people are buying, or where a bunch of people like to go, and I thought it was a super cool experience, just stepping outside of my comfort zone and kind of just taking, like, a bunch of micro risks. (US08, 18:116 ¶ 90)

A Brazilian student who was already familiar with São Paulo and had experienced more independence than some of the U.S. students talked about the ways in which the social dynamics of the programme required him to step out of his comfort zone:

Yeah, because my uni only sent one person to it, I was solo. And then when I got there, I kind of started talking with like Brazilians, and then we got to the Americans and then everybody just started talking together. So, it was a pretty... because I am like an introvert. And I, I have difficulties with like talking to people. So having that, you know, breaking that pattern of not talking to people and just getting myself out there. (2:40 ¶ 77 in BR02)

This same student reflected on the ways in which having the VE experience and developing a group identity before meeting in person made it easier for him to get past his shyness:

Because I thought I only like, those are the type of things that it's like, it's a one-time opportunity, right? So, let's make the best out of it. So, I think that that's my brain telling me to just go for it. And just break out of the pattern. So yeah, I really felt like I outdid myself. But at the same time, I'm, I'm, I am an introvert. But as soon as I meet you, it's easier for me. We know each other and you know, it's really easier. And as we were, like in a set group...the time that I knew like anyone there, it's also easier to get to know the other part of the group, if that makes sense. So even though I didn't know everybody in the group, as I was inside of the group, you know, I can talk to them, you know, "Hi, I'm [his name], you know, this guy, you know," it's like I know them already so it's easier as time goes on, for sure. And so it was it was really good to like, get out of my comfort zone but not that much because I know I'm in, like, home (BR02, 2:43 ¶ 89).

For this Brazilian student, the VE served as a form of scaffolding, making it easier for him to move out of his comfort zone and meet new people. Shyness or introversion came up 20 times during the interviews. In some cases, the students are describing others and in some cases themselves. Another Brazilian student also described a similar experience to BR02, reflecting:

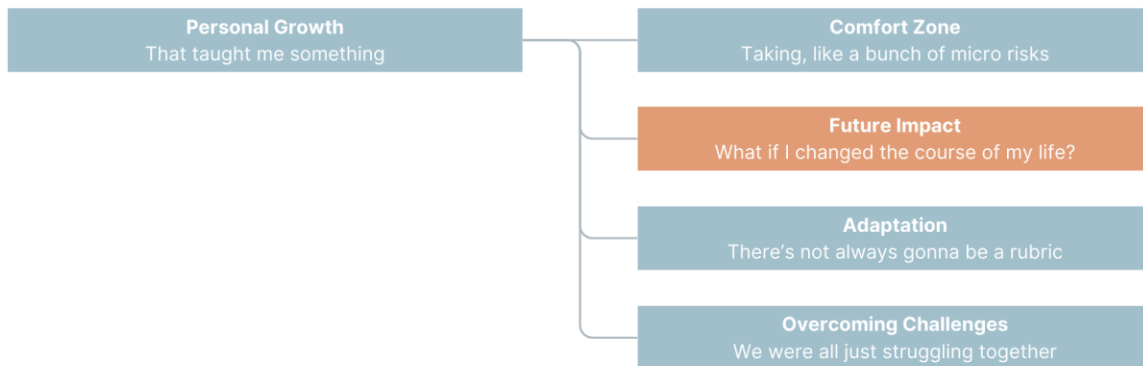
For my opinion it was great to know before on the meeting then go know them in person because I think like I'm too shy so I don't just know them in person, directly. I kind of feel—oh, that they talk [to each other] and I don't go there with them. So [without the VE she would be] more shy to talk with. (BR07, 9:00 ¶ 497)

These reflections illustrate how the experience of stepping outside of one's comfort zone was a meaningful aspect of personal growth for many students. For individuals like BR02 and BR07, the VE served as a scaffold that eased the transition into new social environments by providing an initial sense of familiarity with the group before meeting in person. This gradual approach allowed students to push against their tendencies toward introversion and shyness in manageable ways, often by taking what one student described as “a bunch of micro risks.” These small acts led the students to feel greater confidence and social ease over time. The VE component also highlighted the importance of “structured freedom,” where students could safely explore new environments and social interactions while maintaining a sense of support.

*Subtheme Two: Personal Growth: Future Impact: “What If I Changed the Course of My Life?” (Gr=43)*

**Figure 19**

*Personal Development Themes and Categories from Interviews: Subtheme of Future Impact*

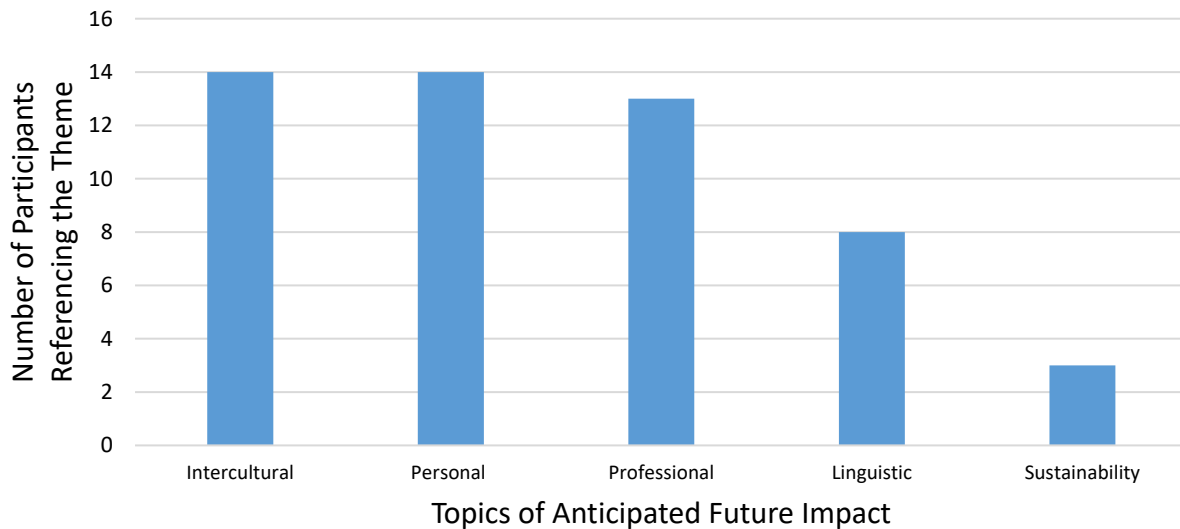


The theme of “future impact” was prominent in the students’ transcripts, but it is important to note that it aligns with the interview question “How do you think this experience will be impactful in your future?” As such, the prevalence of the theme alone does not indicate significance. Rather, the significance comes from understanding what the students thought the future impact might look like. Figure 20 shows the areas of future impact that the students describe. As the interview was semi-structured, I did not ask this specific question to each student. If they had already answered it, I did not ask it again. In these cases, the “future impact” is found elsewhere in the interview. Figure 20 shows the number of participants who referenced key impact areas including intercultural, personal, professional, and linguistic development and sustainability in their reflections. The numbers on the chart represent every participant who mentioned the theme, with total number of participants displayed along the vertical axis. Professional, personal, and intercultural growth are the most cited, indicating these are areas

where students anticipated the greatest impact occurring as a result of their participation in the programme.

**Figure 20**

*Future Impact*



Notably, sustainability emerged as an unexpected theme. Although this area was not asked about in the surveys or semi-structured interview questions, it emerged in interviews and open-ended survey questions, likely due to the course’s focus on the business challenge for a sustainable fashion company.

Several students reflected on how they could leverage their experience in the programme to advance their professional development. Some even expressed an interest in shifting their academic or career paths. For example, one Brazilian student, who was not originally studying business, shared how the programme sparked a newfound interest in pursuing a career in business:

I am sure about one thing that this trip, it opened my mind and possibilities. As I told you, I was just thinking about political science or international relations, what I have

gotten myself used to, but this trip opened my mind to “What if I go to the finance area, to the finance field? What if I changed my area? What if I changed the course of my life?” So, like it definitely expanded my horizons. So, I think that this is something that this trip did to me it opened my horizons. It expanded my networking related to connections to professors and, and also, I got in touch with some of the some of the, some of the people who worked in enterprises we visited. So where else have more connections to maybe if I want to get a job in São Paulo, this helped me a lot as well. And also, the connections with the friends I made. (BR04, 1:33 ¶ 115)

This reflects how the programme opened up new venues for professional exploration among the participants. In addition to the work they did together on the business case, the company visits that they participated in while on-site in Brazil were important ways of exposing students to new areas of business and providing networking opportunities, especially for the Brazilian students. Another U.S. student shared how the experience reshaped his personal goals, particularly around the idea of living and working abroad:

But now I’m not so sure, because there seems to be professional, personal, you know, opportunities anywhere you go. And I seem to actually enjoy the opportunities and the culture *there* more than here, honestly. And so, you know, with that in mind, I feel like it’s—it’s given me the travel bug, if you will. Yeah, like to I’d like to blend that with my professional and academic life, if possible, maybe do another study abroad experience in the future. Hopefully! More than maybe. And maybe work or live in a different culture, country, when I’m older, I feel like that’s really what this experience has kind of impressed on me. It’s kind of changed my, my goals, at least insofar as where I want to live. It’s opened things up. So, I’m glad for that. (US16, 19:23 ¶ 239)

While sustainability was not something that many students touched upon as an area of future impact, this may have been in part because it was not a topic prompted in surveys or interview questions. One U.S. student reflected on the cultural differences in consumption practices between the U.S. and Brazil:

And every meal where I felt like, everyone [from Brazil] cleared their plate completely, and there was no waste whatsoever. And that, that I'll definitely take away back home, because, like, you can always go up for seconds, I guess. But you want to, like, start with, like, way less than just a portion size [The U.S. students' plates] were, like, we had tried like, forty different things and like took one bite out of and I was like, "Oh my gosh," they look like these Americans coming here and wasting so much food. (US08, 35:00 ¶ 207)

This excerpt shows how seemingly small cultural observations, such as eating habits, can leave a lasting impression on students.

Overall, the reflections on future impact provide insight into how students internalised their experiences and began to imagine long-term changes in their personal, academic, and professional lives. The emergence of sustainability as a theme also highlights the importance of experiential learning, where indirect lessons such as sustainable consumption may resonate alongside those that are explicitly taught.

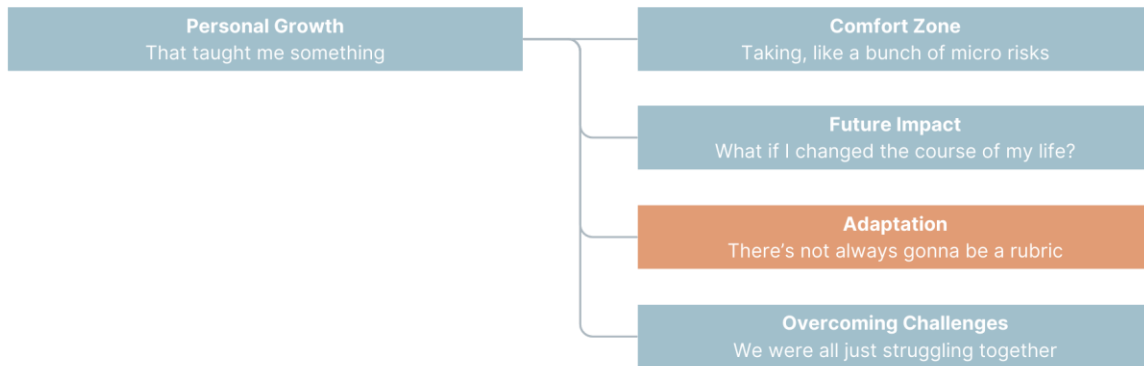
***Subtheme Three: Personal Growth: Adaptation: "There's Not Always Gonna Be a Rubric"***

***(Gr=40)***

Within the theme of "Personal Growth" the category of "Adaptation: There's Not Always Gonna be a Rubric" had a groundedness of 40. Figure 21 shows where this fits in among the other subthemes related to "Personal Growth."

**Figure 21**

*Personal Development Themes and Categories from Interviews: Subtheme of Adaptation*



Several students described adapting to new communication styles, new mediums of communication, and working in a different language. Students also adapted in terms of their ability to connect with each other based on what they had learnt as part of their coursework:

Well, when we were reading *The Culture Map*, like we heard that Brazilians kind of like, you have to, like, warm up to them at the beginning, to kind of like, gain their trust in a way. And it kind of felt like it was very easy for everyone in our group to connect, just because we started, like, the Zoom calls off strong, like not having moments of silence, and, like, making sure people were speaking and stuff like that was really helpful. And like, to be engaging with all the students, um, and, yeah, it seemed like a good transition in person as well, just because we'd known each other. (US19, 15:72 ¶ 84)

In terms of adapting to being in Brazil, one U.S. student described an unnerving experience he had just hours after arriving in Rio de Janeiro. The traffic patterns were unfamiliar, which made crossing the street challenging and he had also just been warned by a Brazilian classmate not to leave his wireless headphones in:

But in that moment I was just, like, “Everything is happening too fast” and like, it kind of triggered my anxiety to just like, ... you need to be more aware...But, um, you know, those are just experiences in life that I feel like in that moment, I had to just like, I guess, you know, take a different approach, or just maybe that taught me something about patience, you know, and that’s something that I feel like I’m still learning on a daily basis to be patient...But you know, experiences like that are kind of just, like, caught me off guard and kind of just, I guess, teach me to, like, you know, kind of slow down, or just be self-aware, you know. So, all that stuff attributes to, like, the growth and just what I experienced, and the reality of it was like, you know, just need to, like, be self-aware. So that was a big, a big concept. I felt like I was learning throughout the whole trip. (US24, 16:90 ¶ 162)

Within this category, another U.S. student reflected on the role of the book *The Culture Map* which the students read at the beginning of the semester. He spoke about it enabling him to be more adaptable:

And rather to jump to the assumption that like, things might be weird, um, going into the going into it, like, with an open mind, and like, being like, “Oh, this is different, but it’s really why, like, what? More like searching for like, “the why,” rather than making like, some general assumption right away. And I think I found myself throughout the trip, just kind of going back to *The Culture Map*, me being, like, “oh, it’s Brazil time, so like, we’re running 10 minutes late, but okay, they seem to be happy and there’s no problem,” or meeting down in the lobby, and some people were, like, 12 minutes late—we’re on Brazil time. And it was just, it was really interesting, kind of, kind of just like, going into everything with an open mind before and with me, I’m someone who’s, like, always

tight on schedule, and I like, really stress out about the really, like, kind of minute details that, like, aren't worth stressing out over. And I would kind of worry that, like, going into the trip, that, like, I would get lost, or something would happen, and kind of going in with this, like, stress free attitude and like understanding that like, "okay, it's okay if something doesn't happen, what now? How are we going to pivot?" (US08, 14:42 ¶ 108)

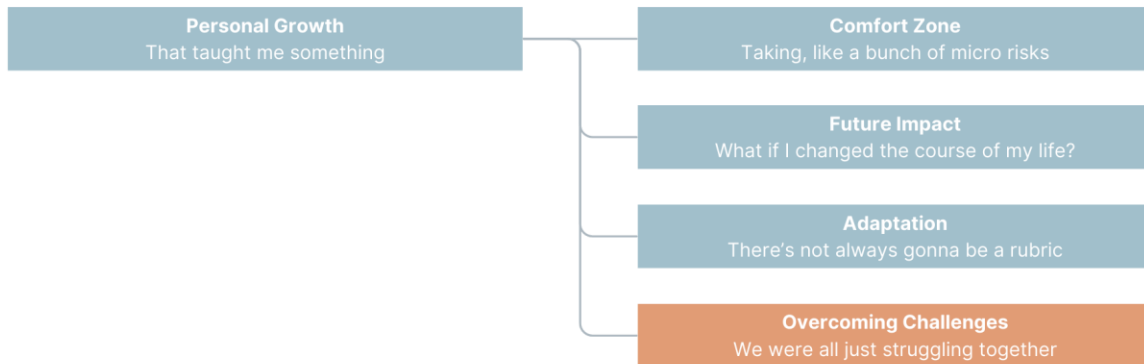
The preparation that students had early in the semester was frequently cited as a way for students to feel more confident navigating unfamiliar contexts.

***Subtheme Four: Personal Growth: Overcoming Challenges: "We Were All Just Struggling Together" (Gr=29)***

Students' perceptions of their growth evolved as they navigated challenges that prompted deeper personal and professional reflection. In describing challenges, students discussed obstacles they encountered throughout the programme, with roughly half of the challenges (70 out of 145) linked to the VE, and the remaining 75 occurring in other areas. The VE presented unique challenges, but it also offered opportunities for students to develop new skills and overcome obstacles. Several factors contributed to these challenges, including linguistic and cultural barriers, conflicting schedules, and time zone differences. Figure 22 shows where this subtheme fits into the category of Personal Growth.

**Figure 22**

*Personal Development Themes and Categories from Interviews: Subtheme of Personal Growth*



A key theme that emerged from these experiences was Overcoming Challenges: “We Were All Just Struggling Together” (Gr=29), which falls under the broader category of Personal Growth. This theme reflects the collective effort that was required to navigate the logistical and personal aspects of the programme. One of the U.S. students described how she overcame her initial anxiety related to scheduling by adopting a more flexible approach:

Definitely the hardest part for us was finding times when everyone could meet. And I know everyone else is probably saying that, because I remember discussing it with everybody, like Brazilian students, American students, we were all kind of just like because our schedules would never match up neatly, and then, like the Brazilian students said they had jobs after school and stuff like that, so it was hard, especially—we had to record our—the parts of our presentation separately in order to get it to work. So that was a big challenge. But something that I kind of took away from the material that we had learned before was that I guess Brazilians are more flexible with time. So, I tried not to

be the whole control freak, like, when are we meeting? What day, what time I need to know. I tried to be more lax about it. (US18, 20:88)

Another student described how her group managed to find solutions despite a number of external commitments:

we all have our busy routines. I am writing a dissertation, BR13 worked. The [U.S. students], they were, they were finishing some stuff from, from their university. So like, we all had to find a right schedule like we did—we used some sites that could help us with it, like there's a site that you put the time that you can, and then the site chooses the time that most people can, yeah, and we, but we manage it, together to do this together, even though the time was a challenge, but other than that, I don't think we had much challenges. (BR04, 1:41 ¶31)

These interview excerpts shed light on the ways in which students adapted to challenges by not only collaborating but also realigning their expectations. Coordinating meetings across time zones and schedules not only presented logistical difficulties but also enabled growth, as students became more flexible, adaptable, and resourceful.

The findings from the interviews reveal how students' perceptions changed as they navigated challenges and opportunities that they encountered as participants in this programme. One key area was personal development. This emerged as students described the ways in which they adapted their communication styles, learnt to manage logistical challenges, and engaged in reflection as they stepped outside their comfort zones. Themes such as “What if I changed the course of my life?” show how the programme sparked reflection on alternative career paths and life trajectories, while others described “taking a bunch of micro risks” as the students embraced independence in new contexts. These findings illustrate how moments of discomfort and

discovery contributed to both immediate growth and the confidence to devise and reconsider future aspirations.

### **Summary of Findings for RQ 1**

The main findings for RQ 1 are the ways in which students' perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolved over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme. In describing challenges, students discussed obstacles they encountered throughout the programme, with roughly half of the challenges (70 out of 145) linked to the VE. This clearly provided an opportunity for students to develop new skills in problem-solving and overcoming obstacles. Analysing the student interviews reveals the ways in which the VE fostered student development: through the coordination of meetings across time zones, through the navigation of scheduling conflicts, and through the opportunity to get to know more about their international peers. These findings suggest that the VE played a role in laying the groundwork for student development in all five areas of development measured, but that the in-person dimension played an important role in solidifying this growth.

In exploring students' perceptions of their growth in these areas, the quantitative data show a prominent V-shaped trendline. In analysing trends among the survey items, 18/19 showed the lowest score in Phase 2 and a rebound in Phase 3, and of these, more than half peaked in Phase 3. This suggests that students' initial expectations had not yet been met in Phase 2 but would be exceeded in many areas by Phase 3. This suggests that the full programme provided essential learning opportunities and indicates that significant growth took place during the final phase of the programme. Rather than seeing the post-VE dip as a failure of the programme, it suggests that there was productive discomfort as students navigated challenges.

This trajectory follows experiential and transformative learning theories, in that challenges often preceded students' deeper learning.

The quantitative trends are triangulated with open-ended survey responses and interview findings. The sentiment analysis of the open-ended survey data follows the V-shaped trend seen in the quantitative data, wherein the greatest percentage of positive sentiments was expressed in Phase 1 and Phase 3. Social aspects of the programme that students identified as being "excited about" followed a similar V-shaped trend with students being most excited about getting to know new people in Phase 1 and Phase 3 with a dip in Phase 2. The Hybrid Exchange Programme's sequence of VE followed by in-person exchange scaffolded this process. That the V-shaped trend emerged in both quantitative and qualitative data, adding strength to the inference that the trajectory was a core feature of students' experience.

While there is a clear dip in the Phase 2 survey questions, this reflects the fact that students were responding in light of outcomes they anticipated for the full programme. Additionally, the subsequent interviews with the students reveal that the VE served a crucial role. For some students, it enabled a more gradual introduction into the new social setting, which created a sense of familiarity and belonging. Allowing the students to get to know each other more gradually enabled them to push against their tendencies toward shyness in manageable ways, often by taking what one student described as "a bunch of micro risks." Additionally, the cultural preparation that the students experienced during the VE was frequently described in interviews as a way for students to feel more confident navigating unfamiliar contexts. The VE created discomfort in line with Mezirow's "disorienting dilemma" concept (1991), and prompted students to stretch outside the limits of their comfort zone. The discomfort both challenged students and also strengthened their desire for connection and belonging, leading to changes that

became central to the students' reflections—ones that will be more fully explored in the section that explores RQ 3: Agency and Belonging. The next section, “Navigating Online Intercultural Interactions,” will explore some of the challenges that the students faced in the VE in greater depth.

### **Navigating Online Intercultural Interactions**

This section explores the challenges that students encountered during the VE. The VE posed two challenges: first, it required communication to be mediated through technology. Second, it took place within a cross-cultural context, one in which students navigate cultural and linguistic differences. The findings in this section respond to RQ 2:

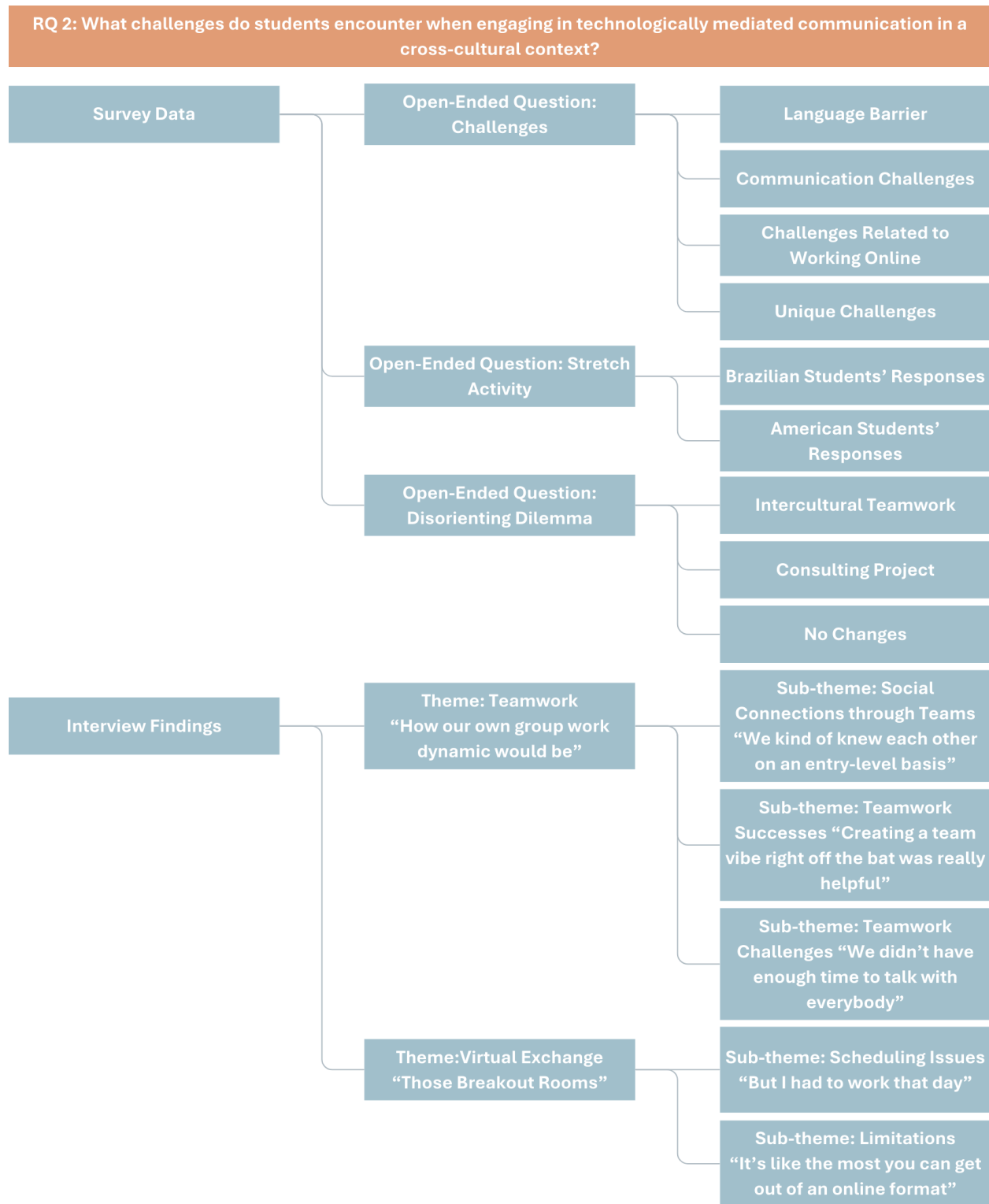
**RQ 2:** What challenges do students encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context?

Findings draw on open-ended survey data from Phase 2 and Phase 3 and on the student interviews conducted after the end of the programme. The full overview of data used to support this research question is shown in Figure 23.

This section begins by exploring challenges that students described via the open-ended questions, including the language barrier, communication, and working online. Additionally, unique challenges, including introversion, hierarchy, and creativity emerged unexpectedly from the data. Next, reflections on stretch activities and disorienting dilemmas reveal how students adapted to these challenges, developed new skills, and demonstrated resilience in navigating cross-cultural teamwork. Finally, interview findings related to this RQ are explored. In particular, student reflections on their team dynamic and on working in the virtual environment are discussed.

Figure 23

Overview of Data for RQ 2

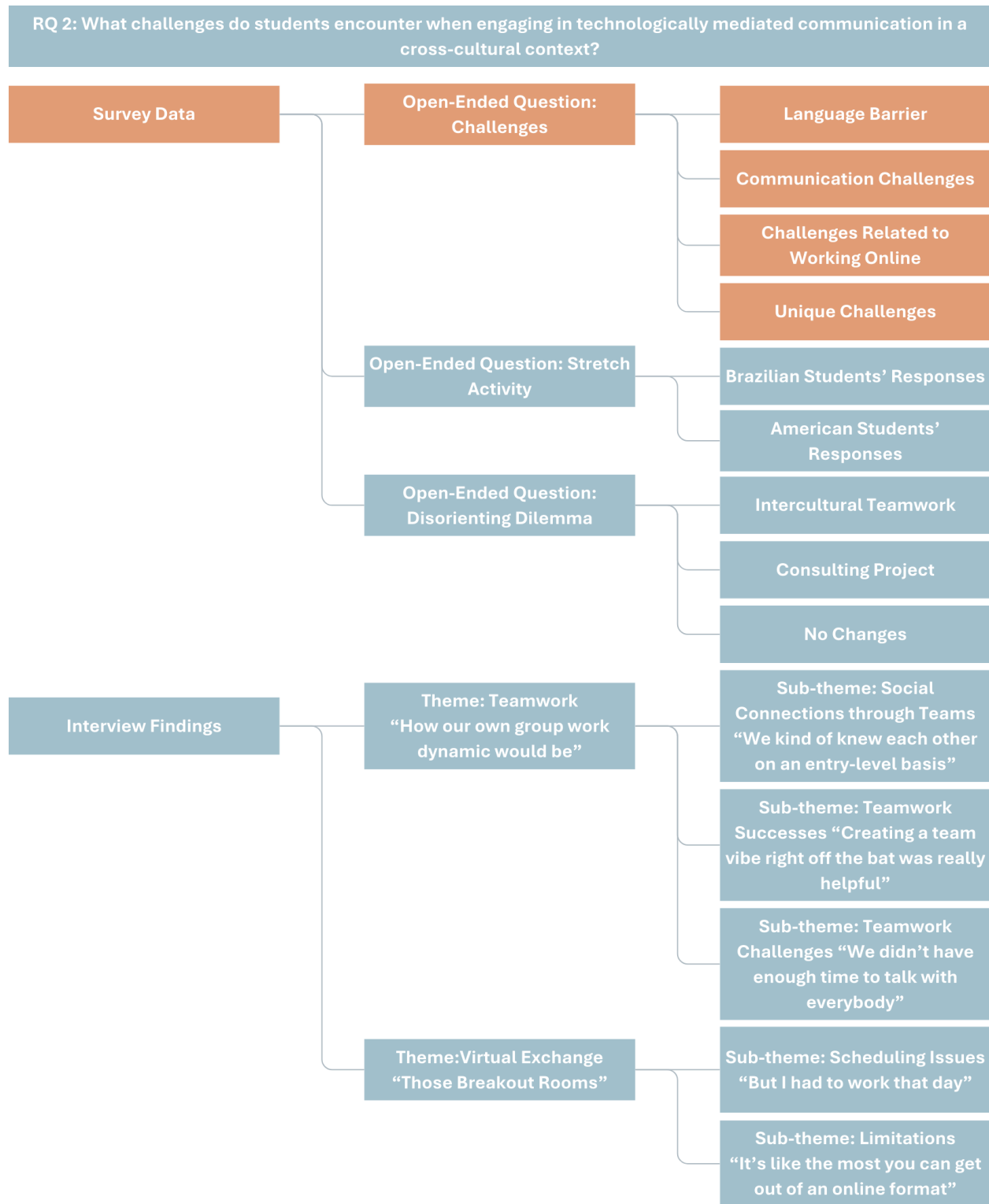


### **Open-Ended Survey Data to Support RQ 2**

In Phase 2 and Phase 3, students were asked to reflect on this question as part of their survey, “What were some of the challenges of participating in this programme?” This question was based on findings from the pilot study which showed that the experience was challenging for students, and I wanted to explore that in more depth. Figure 24 shows an overview of the kinds of data used to answer RQ 2. Highlighted in orange are the specific areas that focus on “challenges.”

Figure 24

Overview of Data for RQ 2 Highlighting Open-Ended Survey Questions on Challenges



Student responses reflected a wide variety of challenges with the bulk being concentrated around linguistic, intercultural, and communicative challenges. The following subsections discuss these, covering “language barrier,” “communication,” “challenges related to working online,” and “unique challenges” (see Table 15). Given the centrality of “challenges” to the student experience, the following four sections will explore them in greater detail, beginning with language barrier, then communication more generally, working online, and finally unique issues.

**Table 15**

*Theme: Challenges*

<b>Challenge Described</b>	<b>Phase 1</b>	<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Phase 3</b>
<b>Language Barrier</b>	11	1	9
<b>Communication</b>	9	4	2
<b>Working Online</b>	2	7	2
<b>Unique Issues: Creativity</b>	0	2	0
<b>Unique Issues: Introversion</b>	0	2	0
<b>Unique Issues: Hierarchy</b>	0	1	0
<b>Unique Issues: Monetary</b>	0	0	1
<b>Unique Issues: Safety</b>	0	0	1

***Subtheme One: Language Barrier***

The U.S. and Brazilian students had different experiences with the “language barrier” challenge. It was much more prominent for the U.S. students. For U.S. students, in Phase 1 when they were asked about challenges that they anticipated dealing with, a very high number (eight U.S. students out of eleven total) listed the language barrier as a challenge that they expected to encounter with their teammates, for instance: “Some of the challenges I think will occur is the

language barrier, and though it might not be a huge problem I think it will still be evident with communication through the internet, and making sure we keep in contact while working together” (US43, 39:2 ¶ 20). After the VE concluded, only one U.S. student referenced the language barrier as an *actual* challenge. This suggests that students may have initially overestimated the ways in which language would pose a significant barrier. They may also have become more skilled at managing these linguistic differences over the course of the VE. Surprisingly, for U.S. students, their references to “language barrier” as a concept re-emerged in Phase 3, albeit in a new context. This occurred seven times for U.S. students in Phase 3. When the concern about language barriers re-emerged, it was to describe their own experiences as non-native speakers while in Brazil. One U.S. student described his experiences as such:

I think the main challenge was the language barrier. When we were accompanied by one of the students that lived in Brazil, it was a lot easier to communicate with others.

However, as soon as they weren't around us anymore, it became super complicated to communicate with locals that didn't speak English. (US31, 77:2 ¶ 12)

Overall, the Brazilian students experienced this differently. It was not something they frequently mentioned in their survey responses (occurring three times in Phase 1; not at all in Phase 2; and twice in Phase 3). Language skills are perceived less as a challenge and more often described as a goal, as referenced in the subsection on “Goals.”

### ***Subtheme Two: Communication***

Communication was another perceived challenge. This encompasses more than just linguistic barriers, but also virtual communication barriers, intercultural misunderstandings, and the difficulty of building rapport online. As with concerns about the language barrier, this emerged as an anticipated concern in Phase 1 and ended up being less of a concern as the

programme progressed (Phase 1: nine occurrences, Phase 2: four occurrences, Phase 3: two occurrences). This decline may reflect an initial period of adjustment that gave way to increased comfort with virtual and intercultural communication as the programme progressed. In Phase 1, one student wrote, “Some of the challenges I could potentially see are language barriers and cultural differences. Communication is, is no easy feat and by creating more barriers such as language or cultural differences, more room for miscommunication occur.” (US36, 29:2 ¶ 20). Likewise, in Phase 2, a Brazilian student wrote that an ongoing challenge was “Difficult communication with other participants from other cultures and also through online mode” (BR27, 10:2 ¶ 4). Similar to findings from the subsection on language barriers, linguistic challenges are less frequently reported by Brazilian students, indicating that they may have been more comfortable navigating the programme’s language demands.

### ***Subtheme Three: Working Online***

In Phase 2, students’ references to the challenges of working online peaked with 11 total references. One U.S. student described the experience succinctly, “I think some challenges of participating are dealing with conflict within working with students internationally and virtually” (US46, 50:2 ¶ 4). The students’ frustrations seemed to extend to the structural limitations of virtual medium itself. One student noted how the virtual format presented additional hurdles, writing, “Learning to navigate working virtually with people I have never met face to face was challenging at first” (US39, 51:2 ¶ 4). Working remotely impacted students’ willingness and motivation to collaborate. One participant described how it impacted his experience, stating:

I think motivation was one of the challenges. Not having actually met the people yet and doing this all virtually made for a more unclear structure. There was also less time than I

thought to work on the project during class and with busy schedules outside of class as well as different time zones finding time to work was a challenge. (US42, 60:2 ¶ 18)

The Brazilian students expressed similar frustrations with the virtual format. One student wrote that communication was difficult “with other participants from other cultures and also through online mode” (BR27, 10:2 ¶ 4). The in vivo code *It’s Like the Most You Can Get Out of an Online Format* (Gr=29) was applied to approximately half of the interview transcripts (12/23), capturing how students felt constrained by the structure of virtual communication.

#### ***Subtheme Four: Unique Issues***

Finally, one of the benefits of open-ended survey questions is that they can shed light on areas that would not be obvious to the researcher (Albudaiwi, 2017). One such example is “introversion” which was reported as a challenge by two of the Brazilian students. Additionally, two students described challenges related to creativity, and one described the challenges related to hierarchy. These also emerged exclusively from the Brazilian students, which could suggest that the teamwork may have pushed them outside their comfort zones in ways that are different than for the U.S. students. In contrast, U.S. students reported monetary (Gr=1) and safety challenges (Gr=1) in Phase 3, reflecting how international travel impacted some students’ experiences. Exploring these challenges also shows how issues like “introversion,” “creativity,” “safety,” and “monetary concerns,” while rare, also reveal a more personal dimension of this programme. Students engaged in many deeply personal experiences, and as these findings show, not all the challenges that they faced were collective.

In terms of challenges, language barriers emerged as a significant concern at the programme’s outset, with students initially worried about their groups’ ability to communicate in English. These concerns diminished by Phase 2 with only one student mentioning the language

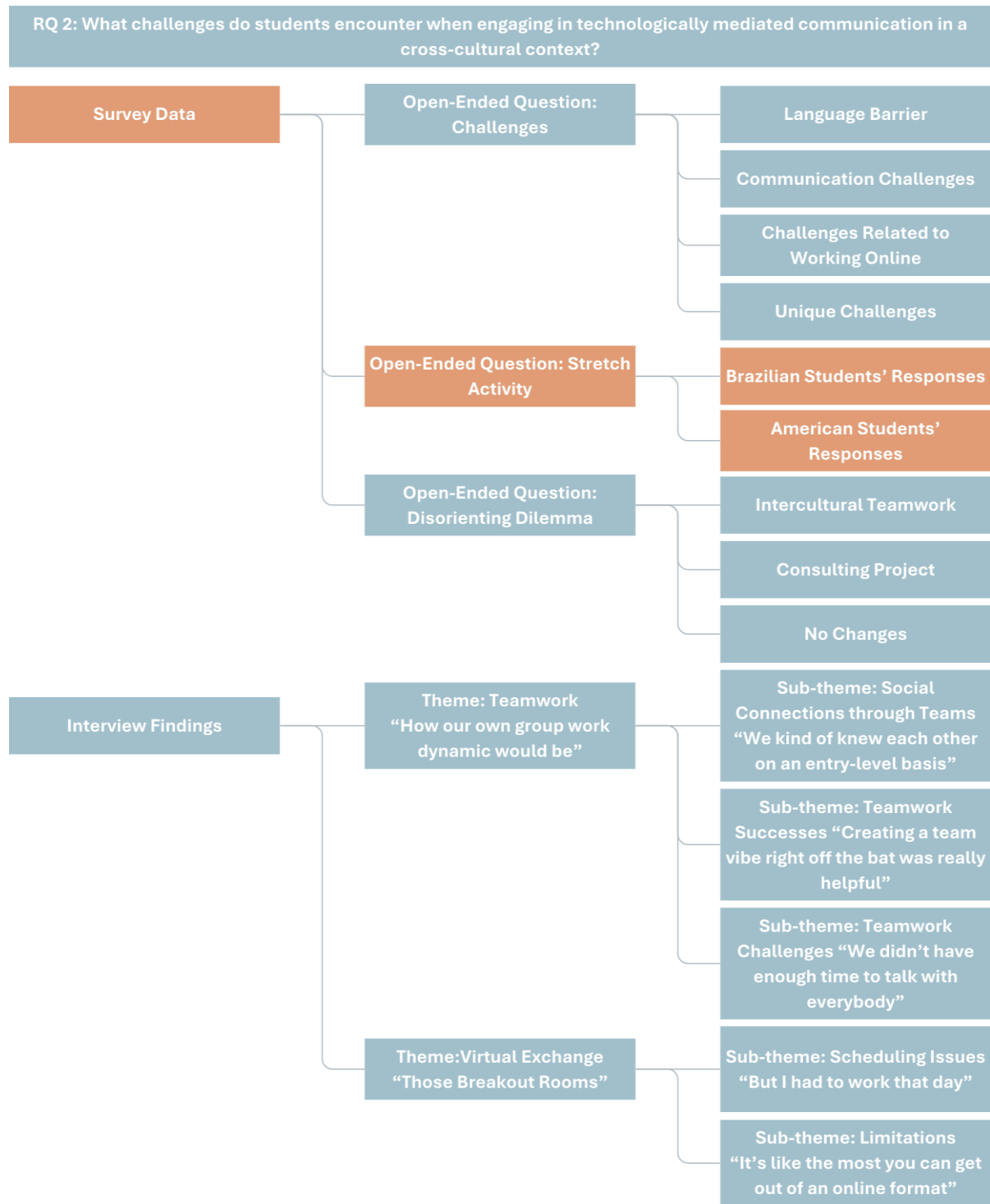
barrier as a challenge at the end of the VE. By Phase 3, the language barrier was only mentioned in reference to the U.S. students and their challenges communicating in Portuguese while onsite in Brazil. Brazilian students are less likely to mention the language barrier as a challenge at all, and when language was mentioned, it was more frequently framed in terms of the goal of language improvement rather than the challenge of the language barrier. Students may have overestimated this challenge or found ways to adapt.

### **Stretch Activity**

The surveys prompted the students to reflect on a stretch activity in Phase 2 and Phase 3. This was prompted by the open-ended question, “Can you describe an activity you participated in as part of the VE or in-person experience in Brazil that challenged you to develop new knowledge, skills, or perspectives? What was the activity, and how did it push you beyond your previous capabilities? Reflecting on your experience, what factors do you think influenced your approach to this challenging activity?” Both Brazilian and U.S. students encountered significant challenges in the VE and in-person components, which required them to develop new skills, adapt to unfamiliar contexts, and broaden their perspectives. Figure 25 shows where this fits into the overall data supporting RQ 2. The following sections will explore how the stretch activities played out for both the Brazilian and U.S. students.

Figure 25

Overview of Data for RQ 2 Highlighting Open-Ended Survey Questions on Stretch Activity



When students were prompted to reflect on “stretch activities” in the Phase 2 survey, all of their responses related to the work on the VE business case. This is not surprising given that their experience up to that point had been working on the VE business case. It was somewhat surprising though, that *all* the Brazilian students chose to reflect on the VE experience again in Phase 3, after in-person exchange in Brazil had concluded. The “Stretch Activity” section examines the differences between the Phase 3 responses, wherein all 7 Brazilian responses focused on the VE, while only 7 out of 17 U.S. responses address the VE, with the remaining responses reflecting on on-site experiences. A comparative analysis of the Brazilian and U.S. students’ responses explores the differences in how the students experienced the VE. These insights shed light on how factors such as programme structure, cultural context, and individual expectations shaped their engagement and learning across the two components.

### ***Brazilian Students’ Stretch Activities***

Brazilian students used the “stretch activity” question to explore how the project that they worked on during the VE moved them out of their comfort zone in productive ways. One Brazilian student wrote:

Most of [our] virtual exchange was a challenge for me to develop new skills, knowledge and perspectives. Being so far away from each other really makes it difficult to create connection and to engage with everyone in a personal level. Getting myself out there is one of them, letting go of fear and anxiety by itself is a pretty hard experience as a habit. Talking to everyone, even though not knowing them to a bigger project is something that pushed beyond my previous skills as I’m a very introverted person. The programme setting by itself influences us as students to engage and connect with different people, so

I think that was the main factor for me to get out of my shell and be more open to a new experience. (BR22, 15:5 ¶ 10)

This reflection points to the design of the programme as a catalyst for student growth. BR22 observes that “the programme setting by itself influences us as students to engage and connect with different people,” suggesting that it was not simply the student's motivation, but the demands of the VE that created conditions for transformative learning. From an experiential learning theory perspective, the programme design fostered concrete experiences that challenged students to move beyond their usual behaviours, in this case, allowing what the student describes as “fear and anxiety” to limit interactions. The need to collaborate across distance and culture required active experimentation with new interpersonal strategies and engagement styles. For this student, the VE prompted reflection, skill development, and required openness. This highlights the importance of designing learning environments that create opportunities for connection and call on students to enact it in productive ways.

While BR22 touches on the dual challenges of online, intercultural communication BR18 writes about being “pushed” in a productive way:

Working online in a group with students from another country was definitely an experience that helped me develop new skills. Collaborating in group projects always demands effort due to differing perspectives among members, but the added complexity of cultural differences and language barriers made this project particularly challenging. However, these difficulties pushed me beyond my comfort zone and allowed me to explore skills I didn't realise I had, such as cross-cultural communication and adaptability in a global context. (BR18, 16:5 ¶ 10)

BR18's statement that the experience "allowed me to explore skills I didn't realise I had" reflects both the student's acquisition of new abilities and the recognition of existing but untested capacities. As Kolb (2015) conceptualises it, experiential learning is "the creation of knowledge through the transformation of experience" (p. 186). In this case, the student's discomfort working across linguistic and cultural barriers provided a concrete experience that prompted reflection and active engagement, leading to the emergence of new awareness about their abilities. Rather than simply being taught these skills, the student discovered them in action. Finally, BR25 writes:

One activity that challenged me was the development project with [our client]. We conducted market research, analyzed their business model, and proposed strategies to enhance their social impact. This pushed me to apply theoretical knowledge in a practical setting and collaborate with diverse team members. Several factors influenced my approach: the foundation of knowledge from workshops and classes, cultural exchanges and dynamic activities that broadened my perspective, and the supportive environment encouraging collaboration. This experience enhanced my skills in social business and taught me the value of adaptability and open-mindedness. (BR25, 20:5 ¶ 10)

What stands out in BR25's reflection is the student's awareness of how multiple programme elements—academic preparation, cultural exchange, and peer support—shaped their approach to a complex real-world task. These elements equipped students to enter unfamiliar situations with transferable strategies in hand.

### *U.S. Students' Stretch Activities*

The U.S. responses to the "stretch activity" are much more mixed in terms of taking place during the VE or in person. As mentioned, in Phase 3 all the Brazilian respondents ( $n = 7$ ) listed

an activity from the VE Phase, whereas for U.S. students responding in Phase 3 ( $n = 17$ ), 7 listed an experience from the VE and 10 listed an experience from their time in Brazil. Here is one such reflection from a U.S. student's time in Brazil:

An activity that challenged me to develop new perspectives and knowledge was our tour to a favela. Prior to visiting Brazil I had researched various favelas throughout Brazil as I was curious to learn more about such a large community within the country. From what I had learned on my own, favelas seemed to have a sort of negative connotation due to high crime rates within some favelas. Sadly, the few stories of violent crimes, misconceptions, and stereotypes seemed to overpower the rich history of favelas and the truths about favelas were hidden. However, as we toured the favela in Rio all of my concerns were quickly gone. Having the opportunity to engage with people born and raised in these favelas disproved all of the incorrect information being shared online. I learned that the majority of the population within the favelas are working class people. Seeing the resilience of the residents in the favela was inspiring as their struggles are generational and a result of issues like racism that largely affects Brazil and many other countries worldwide. (US32, 74:5 ¶ 10)

This reflection demonstrates a cognitive shift: the student begins by describing preconceived notions based on online sources and contrasts them with firsthand experiences. She moves beyond simply reevaluating stereotypes and acknowledges the structural forces—such as racism—that shape life in the *favela*. While she does not directly compare this experience to the U.S. context, her recognition that such issues “affect Brazil and many other countries worldwide” suggests an emerging capacity to situate her observations within a broader frame of understanding.

In the virtual realm, one student reflects on her use of course materials to navigate the “stretch activity”:

When we were first split into teams for our project, we had to overcome the geographical barrier and get to know one another through a screen. Though I had previously participated in group projects online, this was the first time I was working with people who did not go to the same school as me. After reading *The Culture Map*, I knew there might be some differences in how we approach the work, so I did my best to employ the information I learned from that book when working online. Specifically, I worked on getting to know the students on a more personal level in order to build trust for the work rather than solely focusing on getting the job done, as the book had recommended. I am glad I did this approach because I was able to learn about and understand my Brazilian groupmates’ perspectives and approaches to work, and we were able to work together well. (US39, 67:6 ¶ 12)

This reflection highlights the role of intentional preparation in equipping students to navigate the intercultural challenges of virtual collaboration. Rather than being caught off guard by cultural differences, this student drew on concepts from *The Culture Map* to anticipate differences in communication and teamwork styles. Her decision to focus on trust-building rather than task efficiency shows a strategic application of intercultural learning. In this case, the preparatory reading shaped her behaviour during a critical moment in the VE, allowing her to engage with greater empathy. When students were primed to expect differences, they approached such situations with understanding and were able to respond constructively.

### *Stretch Activity Comparisons*

The Brazilian and U.S. students responded differently to the “stretch activity” question with the Brazilian students tending to focus on the VE and the U.S. students being more divided between the VE and travel component. For the Brazilian students, the VE served as a mechanism for learning how to work with international peers, enhance their communication skills, and improve fluency in English. Even after the in-person component of the programme took place, all of their Phase 3 responses ( $n = 7$ ) focused on the VE. They were able to step out of their comfort zone without leaving their homes. Conversely, U.S. students were more divided in their Phase 3 responses with 7 “stretch activities” occurring during the VE and 10 occurring in Brazil. Across both groups, the idea of moving out of the comfort zone was paramount, and many students described experiencing personal and professional growth after doing so. The variety of responses shows how Hybrid Exchange Programmes do not produce uniform stretch experiences but offer culturally situated ways of moving outside the comfort zone, which is a process that students across both groups linked to meaningful personal and professional growth.

### **Disorienting Dilemma**

As part of the survey, in Phase 2 and Phase 3, students were also asked to reflect on a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991). The question asked, “Reflecting on the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil, can you describe a situation that you found confusing or challenging to your usual ways of thinking? Did you change how you normally act as a result?” Table 16 summarises the types and frequency of responses across these two phases, listed in descending order of total frequency.

**Table 16**

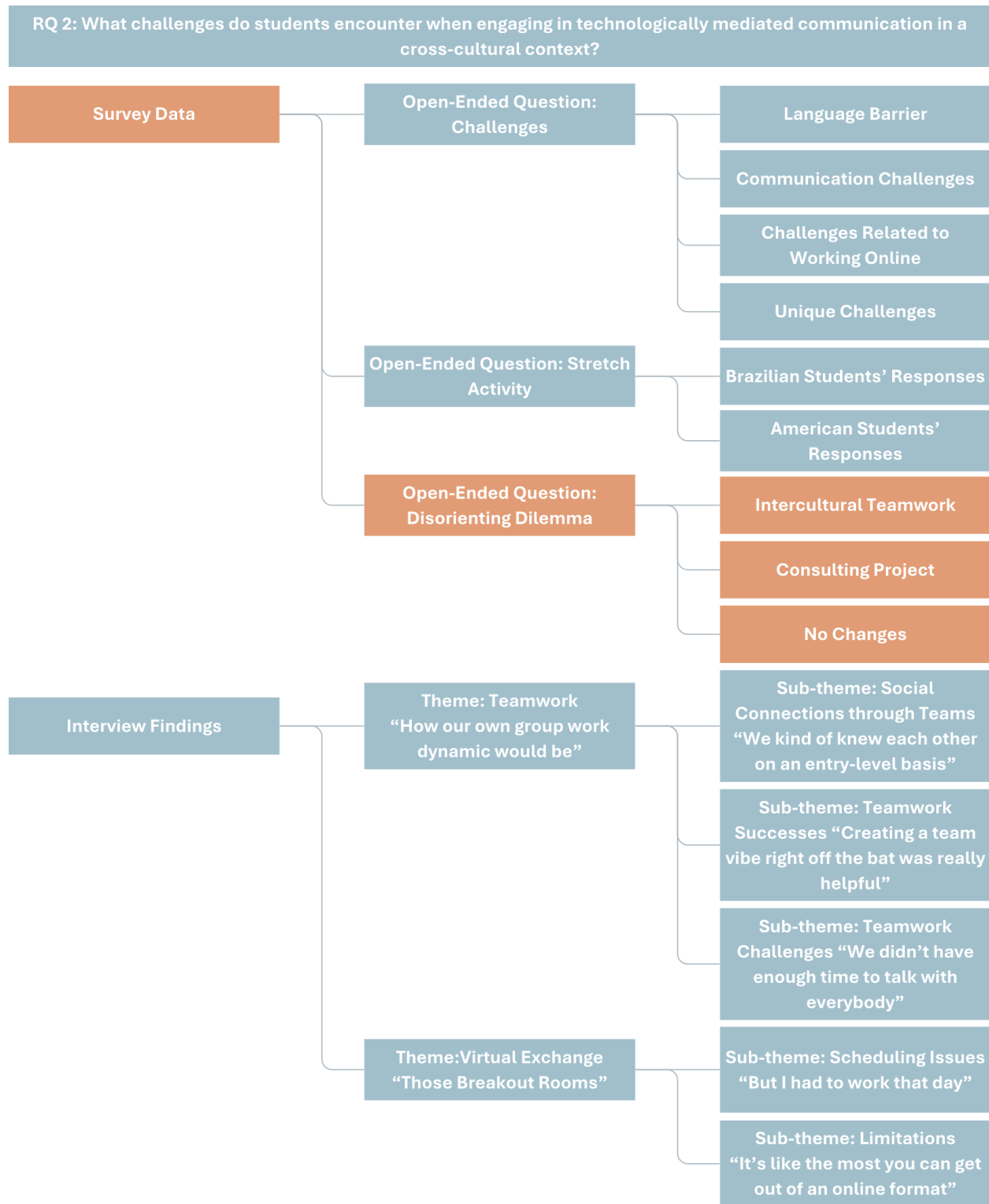
*Disorienting Dilemma by Type, Frequency, and Phase*

<b>Type</b>	<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Phase 3</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Intercultural Teamwork	9	8	17
Consulting project	4	3	7
Language barrier	0	4	4
Adapting Business Strategies	1	1	2
Dancing	0	2	2
Lack of required skills	2	0	2
Uncertainty about change	0	2	2
Feeling unsafe	0	2	2
Challenge to usual way of doing things	0	1	1
Company visits	0	1	1
Course expectations	1	0	1
Acting as Cultural Ambassador	0	1	1
English Comprehension	1	0	1
Sustainability	0	1	1
Uncertainty pertaining to VE	1	0	1

Figure 26 provides a visual representation of the three major areas that emerged as part of the “Disorienting Dilemma” question: intercultural teamwork (Gr=17) and the business consulting project (Gr=7) are the most frequently cited challenges. Four students indicated that they encountered challenges but did not change their behaviour in response. The following sections explore these key areas and students’ reflections. Three areas are explored: intercultural dilemmas, issues with the consulting project, and also a subset of students who indicated they did not experience a disorienting dilemma.

Figure 26

*Disorienting Dilemma*



***Disorienting Dilemma: Intercultural Teamwork***

Several students highlighted challenges related to intercultural teamwork, with some adjusting their behaviour to facilitate smoother collaboration. This excerpt shows a student who accomplished this and then was able to find value in the outcome:

During the virtual exchange and in-person experience in Brazil, one situation that challenged my usual ways of thinking was the dynamic of collaborating with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In one particular workshop, we were tasked with brainstorming solutions for a social issue. The varying perspectives and approaches to problem-solving were initially confusing and challenging for me. I realized that my usual way of thinking was too narrow, and I needed to be more open to different viewpoints. As a result, I changed how I normally act by actively listening, being more patient, and valuing each team member's input. This shift in mindset not only improved our collaboration but also enriched the solutions we developed. This experience taught me the importance of embracing diversity and adapting my approach to include a broader range of ideas and perspectives. (BR25, 20:7 ¶ 14)

Another student referenced the concept of “going with the flow,” perhaps inspired by a guest lecturer who introduced the Portuguese idiom *jogo de cintura*—the need for flexibility:

Yes, one thing I found challenging was we often focused on a specific element rather than a higher level, overall view of the project and we jumped around from area to area which is different from how my brain processes (I like to move in a more ordered fashion). However, I changed how I normally act to go with the flow, which was extremely beneficial because we still got the work done, just in a different way. (US36, 48:7 ¶ 14)

By learning to embrace flexibility and adjust to unfamiliar contexts, students not only completed their tasks effectively but also gained insights into new ways of solving problems.

***Disorienting Dilemma: Consulting Project***



The business consulting project posed its own set of challenges, with students often expressing confusion about the timing of deliverables. While some challenges overlapped with intercultural teamwork, others are specific to project expectations. For example, “I think that the timeline is somewhat unclear with what needs to be done when” (US35, 53:7 ¶ 14). Another student mentioned this as well, but talked about changing his behaviour to meet the demands:

What confused me throughout the online project was the goals of the project itself. There was no set rubric and my group agreed that the deliverables were pretty vague. I, as well as my group, did change the way we usually acted by asking the guides and leaders who met with our group what specifically they were looking for, which was not too common throughout the previous projects that I have done. (US42, 75:9 ¶ 22)

Frustration with the consulting project may have led to a dip in scores in Phase 2 on questions related to academic development (see Table 17).

**Table 17**

*Academic Development Survey Questions Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3 All Students*

<b>Question Topic:</b>	<b>P1 All</b>	<b>P2 All</b>	<b>P3 All</b>	<b>Trendline</b>
<b>Faculty Impact</b>	4.03	3.75	4.15	
<b>Knowledge of Field of Study</b>	3.46	3.03	3.23	

The questions related to academic development had the second lowest average scores across the three phases. Linguistic development with an average of 3.61 was lower, but this was due to the effect of the U.S. students who tended to value language skills development much less than the Brazilian students.

Relatedly, one U.S. student remarked on differences he observed in the ways that the Brazilian students interacted with the company representatives that they met, including the client for whom the consulting work was done:

When we went to company visits, I noticed that the Brazilian students tended to approach the visits with a lot more questions than we did. Additionally, they seemed to enter the visits with the idea that they were more of a discussion rather than a lecture. Though I was surprised by this at first, I really admired their ability to turn these visits into a discussion rather than a presentation. I feel as though it added even more substance to the conversation, and I found myself surprised that I had never approached visits in this way. Originally, I had thought they were presentations where we would ask questions at the end, but I feel as though I learned more through the conversation-like discussions. I will now keep that in mind for future discussions. (US39, 67:8 ¶ 16)

Seeing his Brazilian peers interact in a more conversational manner helped this student to rethink a familiar practice and utilise these new insights in future professional settings.

### ***Disorienting Dilemma: No Changes***

On four occasions, students indicated that they had experienced no behavioural changes. All of these occurred in Phase 2, following the virtual exchange. One student attributed the lack of change to the challenges of online communication:

It comes back to using only online communication. Talking to someone through a computer only is very different than to do it using both methods (In-person and online), In my experience I am very used to know the person first in-person and then establish communications online, it seems easier for me. In my experience, I would rather, in this

project-based situation, do In-person at least once until having to communicate with online. I didn't change how I normally act as a result. (BR22, 8:7 ¶ 14)

This response shows how some students found the virtual format to be a barrier to more meaningful connections, reinforcing the idea that students found the in-person interaction essential in building rapport and facilitating communication across team members.

The concept of a “disorienting dilemma” appeared frequently in students’ reflections, with intercultural teamwork and the consulting project during the VE emerging as the most common sources of these challenges. A smaller number of students cited disorienting experiences from their time in Brazil, which may reflect the limitations students perceived in the virtual format.

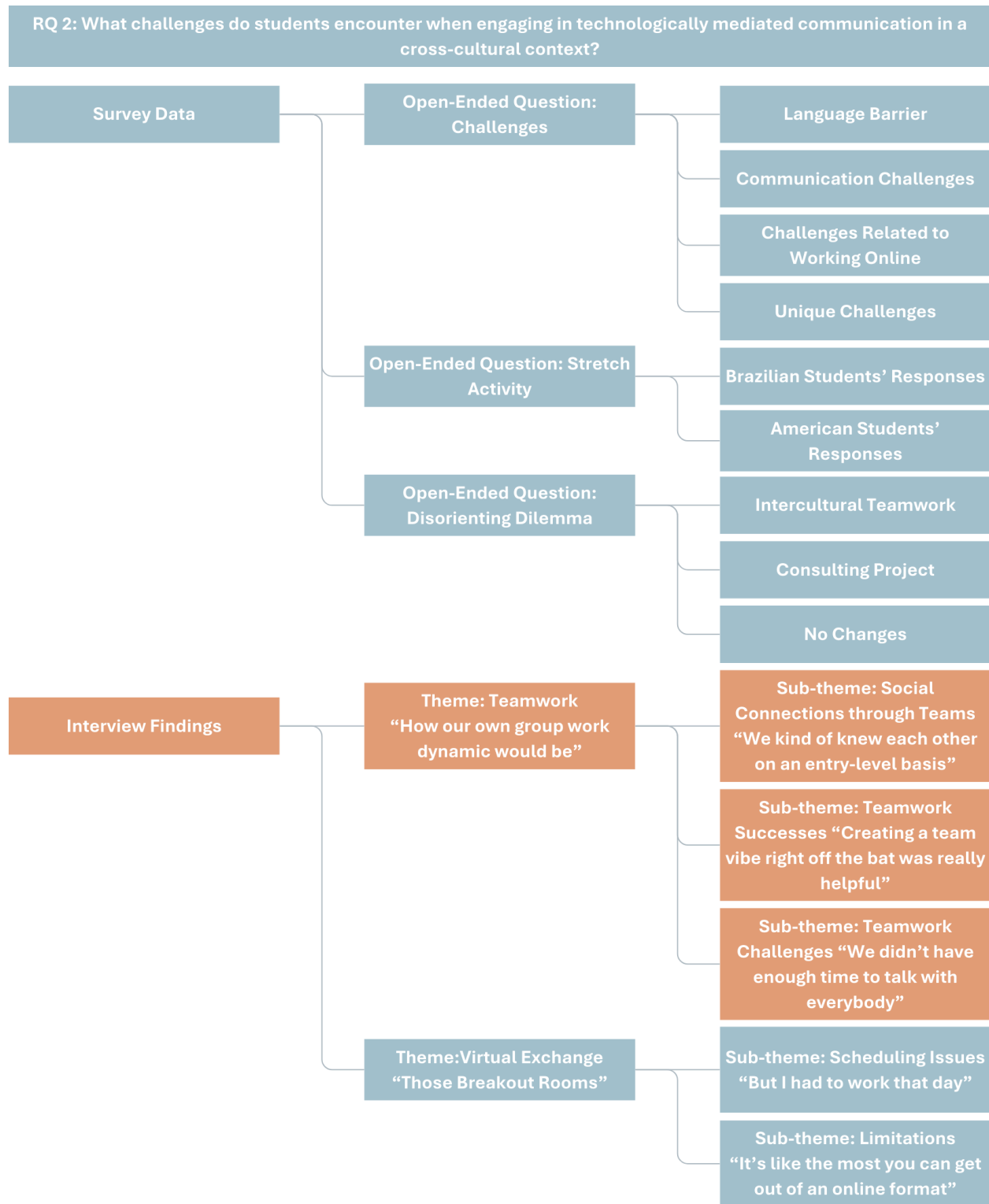
The findings from the survey questions help to answer RQ 2 by shedding light on the range of challenges that students encountered when engaging in technologically mediated, cross-cultural communication. These challenges evolved across programme phases, with initial concerns about language barriers and virtual communication dissipating as students developed strategies to manage these issues or perhaps realised that they are not as prominent as they anticipated. Reflections on stretch activities and disorienting dilemmas underscored how students adapted and grew through these experiences, and many students reported personal and professional growth as they managed the complexities of cross-cultural teamwork in a virtual setting. These findings highlight the diversity of challenges and the students’ capacity for resilience and growth in overcoming them. The next section delves into student interviews to further explore how students experienced challenges in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context.

### **Interview Findings to Support RQ 2**

Seven overarching themes are drawn from interview questions, each of which is represented by a descriptive label and an in vivo code. Of the seven overarching themes that emerged from the interview transcripts, two are related to RQ 2: these are “Teamwork,” represented by the in vivo code “How Our Own Group Work Dynamic Would Be” and “Virtual Exchange” represented by the in vivo code “Those Breakout Rooms.” This is visualised in Figure 27. The following subsections explore the ways in which students experienced teamwork, which was an important component of the VE, and also how they experienced the VE more generally.

Figure 27

Overview of Data for RQ 2 Highlighting Interview Findings Related to Teamwork



**Theme One: Teamwork: “How Our Own Group Work Dynamic Would Be”**

Findings from the interviews show that teamwork played a crucial role in fostering connections and shaping the students’ experiences during the VE. The tasks they collaborated on simultaneously served as a means for them to make progress on their business case and laid the foundation for connections that carried into the in-person interactions. Within the broader theme of “Teamwork,” three key subcategories emerged: *Social Connections Through Teams* (Gr=87), emphasising the bonds students formed through collaborative efforts; *Successes* (Gr=33), showcasing the triumphs and positive dynamics within teams; and *Challenges* (Gr=24), reflecting the obstacles students encountered while trying to balance virtual communication and also build rapport (see Figure 28 for an overview of the categories within the theme of “Teamwork”).

**Figure 28**

*Teamwork Development Theme and Categories from Interviews*

Theme	Categories	Brazilian Occurrences	US Occurrence
Teamwork: “how our own group work dynamic would be”	Team Social Connections: “we kind of knew each other on the like	34	53
	Team Successes: “creating a team vibe right off the bat was really	17	16
	Teamwork Challenges: “we didn’t have enough time to talk with ev	12	12
	Teamwork: “how our own group work dynamic would be”	95	110

The students’ reflections reveal how teamwork allowed them to transition from surface-level contact to building deeper connections.

***Subtheme One: Social Connections: “We Kind of Knew Each Other on the Like, Entry-Level Basis”***

The category “Teamwork: Social Connections Through Teams: “We Kind of Knew Each Other on the Like, Entry-Level Basis” describes how students got to know each other through

their teamwork (Gr=87). These connections extended beyond the group project, helping students feel more comfortable with each other, which in turn made their transition to in-person interactions in Brazil easier. This category's name comes from an in vivo code in which a student reflected on her first in-person interactions with teammates in Brazil, emphasising the limited-but-still-important connections they had built through virtual teamwork. She explained that while their prior knowledge of each other was somewhat superficial, it provided enough familiarity to ease their transition to working together in person. As she put it, "...like when we first met, we did like introductions and stuff like that. So, we kind of knew each other on the like, entry-level basis...we could just jump right in. It was easier" (US20, 08:13¶ 77). For many participants, teamwork facilitated a sense of familiarity, as students noted that meeting in person felt less like an initial introduction and more like reuniting with people they already knew. The significance of this theme is reflected in its frequency: 20 out of 23 students had this code applied to their transcripts, underscoring the value of teamwork as a foundation for meaningful relationships in the programme. One U.S. student emphasised the comfort that came from knowing they would be welcomed by people they were familiar with:

And then, you know, understanding like that, I think that we kind of already knew people, like it felt like we were just going to, you know, we were visiting these people who we already knew, also made the whole programme more comfortable, because it could be like, it can be very nerve wracking just visiting a country where you don't speak the language, you know, without your family and stuff. Like, I think it was very helpful that we were going to be like, received by people we knew. (US21, 7:96 ¶ 84)

These social connections shaped the students' perspectives and helped them navigate the experience of getting to know each other in person. The student's description of being "received

by people we knew,” may have reduced the anxiety of travelling abroad without family support or language fluency. As such, social connections both smoothed the transition to the in-person exchange but also created different dynamics between the U.S. and Brazilian cohorts, shaping how each group navigated the hybrid experience.

***Subtheme Two: Successes: “Creating a Team Vibe Right Off the Bat Was Really Helpful”***

Within the “Teamwork” theme, another prominent theme was “Successes,” represented by the in vivo code “Creating a Team Vibe Right Off the Bat Was Really Helpful.” One example of this comes from a Brazilian student who noted the initial reluctance of her group members to get to know each other online:

Like in the first few meetings that we had together, I could tell that like they were a bit shy. They didn’t want to share much of their stories or about themselves, but I kind of pushed it a little bit because I knew what a big difference like to create a connection before starting the project itself. So, it was really nice though. I think I did a good job on this. Because, like we all... felt comfortable during the video chat (BR09, 8:104 ¶ 144).

Another student who was on the same team as BR09 described her as being a catalyst for creating a positive team dynamic. According to her teammate,

she was always like, starting the conversation. I think having like somebody who wasn’t shy, and like somebody who was like, willing to, like, you know, get the ball rolling was really helpful. And that kind of, you know, made it all more comfortable for everybody. She was just kind of like, you know, always just like, calling people out by their name and being like, like, ‘how are you doing?’ Like, you know, like, ‘what do you think about this?’ and I think that like, really pushed us also to do the same. (05:22, ¶ 22)

The fact that the students would be meeting in person after the VE was often frequently mentioned and seemed to shift the dynamics of the students' interactions, perhaps making them feel more invested in making an effort to get to know each other. One U.S. student describes her feelings as such:

But I feel like knowing that I was going to be able to form connections with the Brazilian students[ in the VE], knowing they were going to be with us, was kind of nice to know, and then allowed me to be more engaging on the Zoom calls, because I knew I would see them in person, but yeah, like knowing that I was going to be a part of, like this group, going to a different country, and like experiencing other cultures, and like hearing throughout like Zoom calls, like, what was going to be expected, like, food they like, and like listening to the music during the zooms, it kind of like, made me excited to go to Brazil, because of all these amazing things that I was hearing about. (US19, 15:63 ¶ 66)

Once again, music played a role in allowing people to open up and get to know each other during the VE. One Brazilian student reflected that:

Oh it was great, because like, when we first met, when we first were assigned together, we all introduced ourselves, we talked more about what we're going to do, what we do in our lives, our interests, and from that, we were able to make the, the identity of our team, we were all very fan of pop music in general. So that's why we chose the name "Queen Bey." Because of Beyoncé. It was the face of Beyoncé and the *Bee Movie*. And everyone thought it was super funny and cool, and we all agreed that's our identity... (BR04, 1:56 ¶ 25)

Creating a shared Zoom background to unify the teams during class meetings was a fun and effective icebreaker. In addition to the Queen Bey background described by BR04, another group

selected an image of a traditional nuclear family—parents and children of various ages gathered in front of a fireplace—and humorously superimposed their own faces onto those of the family members. This mash-up merged the idea of a family portrait with their VE team, building camaraderie and creating a light-hearted tone for the teamwork.

The students were incredibly innovative in finding ways to connect and build relationships in the VE teamwork. In their Zoom backgrounds, they adapted cultural symbols to the digital space to create meaningful engagement despite the challenges of online interaction. By co-creating team identities, like naming their group “Queen Bey,” they built a sense of community and belonging. Their proactive efforts to engage teammates early on show evidence of their ability to create a collaborative and supportive environment.

***Subtheme Three: Teamwork Challenges: “We Didn’t Have Enough Time to Talk with Everybody”***

Although students employed innovative strategies to navigate teamwork in the VE, they faced several challenges throughout. This has been covered to some extent in the subsections on language barriers, adaptation, and overcoming challenges. Yet since some of these challenges are specific to the group work, they are worth exploring in this section on Teamwork. In discussing ways in which teamwork was challenging, students reflected on how virtual collaboration could limit opportunities for in-depth conversations and relationship-building. These teamwork-specific challenges offer insight into how students navigated unfamiliar group environments with peers from different cultures. This theme emerged across twelve U.S. student transcripts and twelve Brazilian student transcripts.

The students' reflections reveal that virtual teamwork, while productive, often left them struggling to communicate effectively and establish deeper connections. As one Brazilian student described, remote interactions lacked the natural flow of in-person meetings, making it more challenging to engage with teammates:

it just didn't work out in personalities, but it was, it was pretty fun. I really think that, you know, because of online kind of experience, I really felt I really struggled with communicating and engaging with everybody. Because as much as we try to connect with people it's really hard to like, even though we have time together, it's really different than you know, sitting down with someone with like an hour, or even like, half an hour a week, that would be much better than having like two hours online. Because we can connect much, much more. So, I felt like a lot, really a distance between everybody in the group. But I feel like the time that we had together in person was way like we had a better connection than for sure the—I think it was two months. (BR02 11:17 ¶ 101)

Similarly, U.S. students noted the difficulties of expressing opinions openly, particularly when working with unfamiliar teammates across cultures. One student reflected on the discomfort of critiquing group decisions without prior in-person interactions:

Um, in terms of challenges, I would say, maybe just being scared to, like, voice our opinions at times, like if one of the slides or something like, wasn't like, I guess—how do I put this? Um, like, sometimes, like, some slides, like, might not convey the right like, idea that I that I personally thought, or, like some other people in our group are trying to, like, convey, and it's really hard to, like, have that conversation of like, “oh, like, I don't know if, like, that's the best word of choice or that's what we should be putting on the slide,” especially with like, with people like, we've never met before. We've never had,

like, never worked with them in person. I mean, I can't, we can't just change the slides if they're wrong. And that's like, with people in my own group, just because throughout the year, we haven't, like, had that much time to, like, interact with one another and whatnot.

(US08, 18:122 ¶ 132)

However, some students found ways to ease these challenges by adopting strategies for collaborative communication. A U.S. student shared how using “yes-and” statements allowed him to build on others' ideas constructively:

So, I think kind of like having like group recaps and just like maybe, like proposing, like, I think “yes/and” was really helpful. I think I used that like 100 times when we were just talking in groups, like saying “yes AND we could also add this” or, like building on each other's ideas. And I think that was one of, like, just like a helpful thing that, like, I utilised just to kind of build off each other's idea rather than, kind of like scratching things off. (US08, 18:122 ¶ 132)

These reflections showcase how students navigated potentially sensitive situations in a virtual environment and how they were able to experiment with using new ways of fostering collaboration and building trust.

### **Theme Two: Virtual Exchange: “Those Breakout Rooms”**

Findings from the interviews showed that the VE component of the programme introduced challenges and opportunities for students as they navigated logistics, intercultural teamwork, and got to know each other in a virtual environment. Scheduling conflicts are commonly cited, and Brazilian and U.S. students faced a range of external obligations. Students also noted the limitations of virtual interactions, as reflected in the in vivo codes “Those Breakout Rooms” and “It's Like the Most You Can Get Out of an Online Format,” which reveal

how online communication could feel limiting. Within the theme of “Virtual Exchange,” four categories emerged (see Figure 29).

1. VE Scheduling Issues, represented by the in vivo code “But I had to work that day”
2. VE Limitations, represented by the in vivo code “It’s like the most you can get out of an online format”
3. VE to In-Person, represented by the in vivo code “Oh my God, you’re like a real person”  
*(Note: This is explored as part of RQ 3)*
4. VE Impact, represented by the in vivo code “The online part was really important.”  
*(Note: This is explored as part of RQ 3)*

**Figure 29**

*VE Theme and Categories from Interviews*

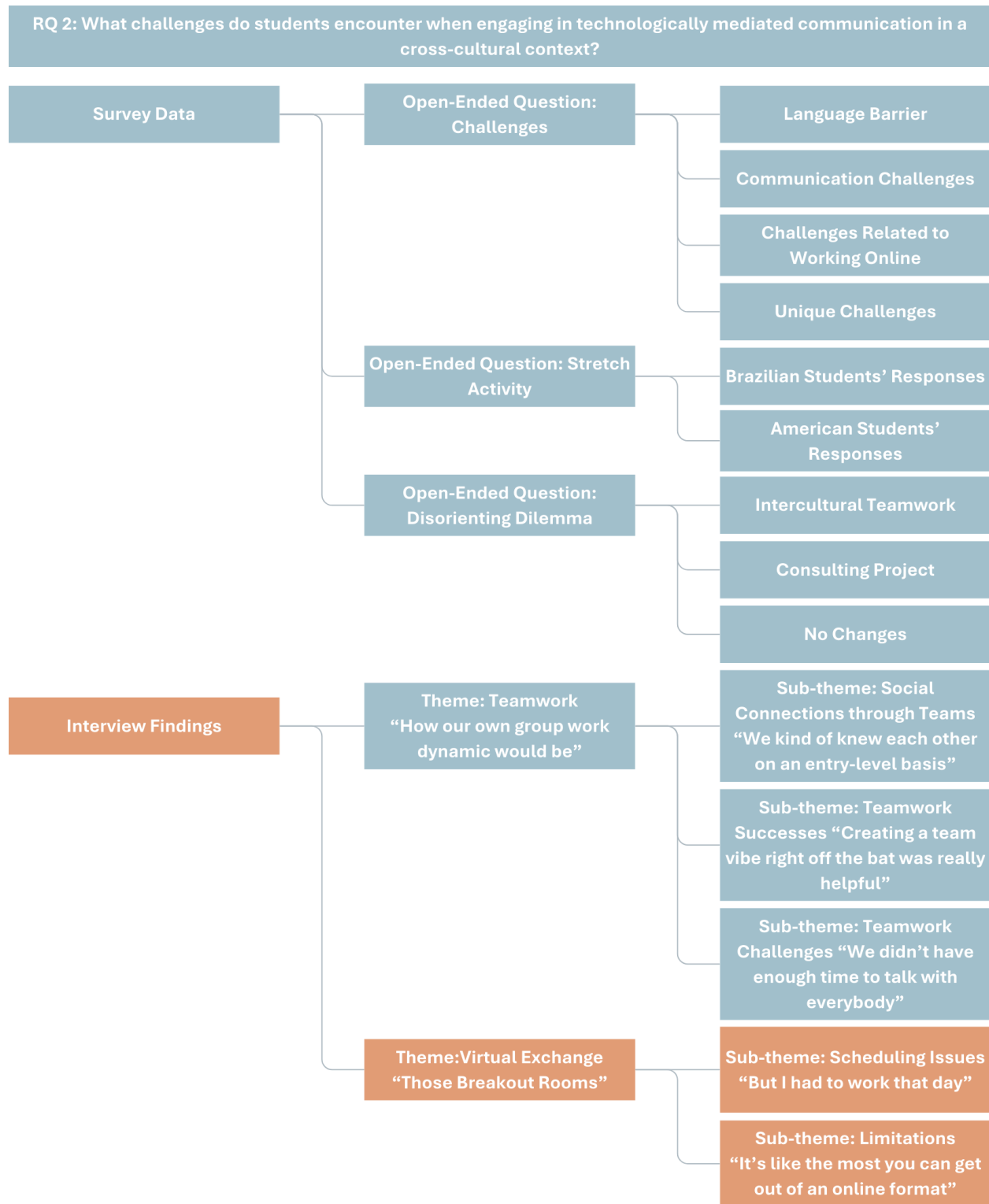
Theme	Categories	Brazilian Occurrences	US Occurrence
Virtual Exchange: “those breakout rooms”	VE Scheduling Issues: “but I had to work that day”	18	33
	VE Limitations: “it’s like the most you can get out of an online form	12	17
	VE to In-Person: “Oh my God, you’re like a real person”	3	24
	VE: Impact: “the online part was really important”	11	16

In discussing RQ 2, I focus on the first and second of these categories: VE Scheduling Issues and VE Limitations. The third and fourth themes are explored as part of the discussion on RQ 3.

Figure 30 provides a visual overview of where these fit into the data supporting this research question. The VE also served as a foundation for the relationships that students would build upon during the in-person phase. Through these experiences, students demonstrated adaptability and resilience and found ways to balance the demands of the programme with their external commitments and to utilise the VE space in innovative ways.

**Figure 30**

*Overview of Data for RQ 2 Highlighting Interview Findings Related to the VE*



Within the theme of the VE, two prominent subthemes are explored: scheduling issues and limitations related to the medium itself.

***Subtheme One: Scheduling Issues: “But I Had to Work That Day”***

Scheduling conflicts were a significant challenge for both Brazilian and U.S. students during the virtual exchange (VE). However, the nature of these challenges differed between the two groups due to their differing academic and personal responsibilities outside of the programme. Many Brazilian students juggled work and internship commitments alongside the programme, as they did not receive academic credit for their participation. Some also faced disruptions caused by university labour strikes, adding uncertainty to their schedules. Meanwhile, U.S. students, all in their first year of university, struggled with the competing demands of adjusting to college life and integrating an international project into their schedules. As one student put it, “Because when I had time, they didn’t have time” (BR07, 18;58 ¶ 3 359). Another student describes the ways she navigates the dual pulls of participating in the in-person exchange as the group did a *capoeira* workshop in São Paulo while she also juggled internship responsibilities. For her photo elicitation submission, she showed herself and her teammates at the park after the *capoeira* event. She is dressed more formally while the rest of the team is casual. She used the forward-facing camera lens to include both herself and her teammates in the photo. The photo shows a smiling group of students with her a bit more poised than her teammates:

And this dynamic that we did on the *capoeira* was really fun even though I got to be working like most of the time, I was literally like with my phone here, and then going to *capoeira*, and then phone, then *capoeira*, then phone. (BR09 30:20 ¶ 353)

U.S. students noticed how the Brazilian participants managed these competing demands, observing that many took evening classes to accommodate employment schedules. One student reflected on how this created additional challenges for the teams:

So, I know when we were in Brazil, and we were talking to them a lot of the students did mostly evening classes and stuff so they can work during the day. So having a class during the day for them wasn't probably the most convenient so they were doing you know their other things while we were in the morning. (US23, 05:58 ¶ 51)

For the most part, U.S. students were not balancing work to the same extent as the Brazilian students, but they nevertheless dealt with the pressures of their first year of college, living away from home, and learning how to manage new commitments. One student described the group's proactive approach to working through these challenges:

I feel like freshman year you have so many commitments because you're still learning where to fit in and everything. And so, it was very hard to get everyone to like meet up and stuff like that. And I always knew that would be an issue. So, I was a little nervous about that. But as we got started my team just like ran into it. We've—we had our presentation, the first week of class and we just started editing that from the first week to the last week. Yeah, cuz we I would talk to other groups and they're like, 'Oh, we haven't even started our presentation.' I'm like, 'What are you guys doing? Like we started this the first week. (10:26 ¶ 48 in US20)

Despite the different challenges faced by the Brazilian and U.S. students, the students demonstrated resilience and adaptability in managing their external commitments while attending to their obligations related to the programme. Brazilian students found creative ways to balance work, internships, and study with programme activities, even multitasking during in-

person sessions. U.S. students navigated the demands of adjusting to their first year of university life and proactively managed their teamwork to stay on track.

***Subtheme Two: Limitations: “It’s Like the Most You Can Get Out of an Online Format”***

The limitations of VE are represented by the in vivo code “It’s Like the Most You Can Get Out of an Online Format” (Gr=29). Approximately half of the students interviewed (12/23) had transcripts assigned to this code. Of these seven are American and five are Brazilian, aligning closely with the ratio of participants by country. As discussed previously in the “Teamwork Challenges” section, many students believed that the VE lacked the depth of in-person encounters. One student succinctly described this challenge by noting: “sitting down with someone with like an hour, or even like, half an hour a week, that would be much better than having like two hours online” (BR02 11:17 ¶ 101). This sense of limitation was echoed by other students, who felt that their online presence was constrained by the nature of virtual communication. Another student described the difference between online and in-person exchanges, reflecting on how face-to-face interaction allowed her to be a more multi-dimensional person:

And I had a feeling that it was more real when it was face to face. When it was online, I felt like I was like my student—my student personality was studying, I was working hard. I was doing the presentation and focusing on that. I think it was much more immersive and much more like an exchange when you came to the phase where you guys were here. (BR11, 5:144 ¶ 246)

These reflections illustrate some of the limitations of VE, where interactions can feel more formal or transactional. While there were ample opportunities for teamwork and cultural exchange, many students expressed that the online setting limited their ability to form genuine

relationships. As one student put it, “We had some great people but I didn’t [feel] like we actually had connected. I was not ready for what would come when we went to face to face to meet those people” (BR11, 5:215 ¶ 60). This is explored in the next section on the concept of belonging.

### **Summary of Findings for RQ 2**

Using open-ended survey data and interview findings, this section explores the challenges that students encountered when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context. The three most commonly listed challenges are the language barrier, intercultural challenges, and communication challenges. In the Phase 1 survey, which took place before the programme started, many students anticipated that the language barrier would be a major challenge. Very few listed it as an actual challenge in Phase 2, but then there was a resurgence in Phase 3 wherein the U.S. students faced the challenges of navigating Brazil with limited Portuguese skills. Communication was another anticipated challenge commonly listed in Phase 1 that then sharply declined, indicating it was not described as a challenge by the students once they began to work together.

Challenges related to working together virtually are very prominent in Phase 2. Students described how working with people whom they had never met face-to-face was difficult. When asked to describe a “stretch activity,” all the Brazilian students focused on the VE, even after the on-site programme had ended. Nevertheless, the challenges faced during the VE are not all perceived as negative. Many students described these activities as moving them out of their comfort zone and making them more flexible and adaptable.

Interview findings allowed for a deep exploration of the ways in which students experienced being on intercultural virtual teams. For many participants, teamwork facilitated a

sense of familiarity, as students noted that meeting in person felt less like an initial introduction and more like reuniting with people they already knew. The fact that the students would be meeting in person after the VE was frequently mentioned and seemed to shift the dynamics of the students' interactions, perhaps making them feel more invested in getting to know each other.

The limitations of the VE, represented by the in vivo code "It's Like the Most You Can Get Out of an Online Format," underscored the limitations of online communication. Scheduling conflicts and external obligations further complicated the experience for students, particularly for the Brazilian participants who juggled work and study. Despite these barriers, many students demonstrated resilience, adopting strategies like "yes-and" communication to foster collaboration. The next section explores how these experiences, though challenging at times, laid the groundwork for successful group dynamics in the in-person phase of the programme and may have contributed to overall student satisfaction with the programme.

### **Agency and Belonging**

This section presents findings from the interview data and photo elicitation, emphasising the importance of social and emotional experiences in fostering meaningful relationships among students. The findings related to this question are derived from interviews and photo elicitation submissions rather than from surveys, as this topic emerged unexpectedly and was not part of the original research questions. A significant amount of what the students shared in the interviews was related to describing how they got to know each other and to conveying how the programme impacted them at a deeper emotional level. The findings presented in this section address RQ 3:

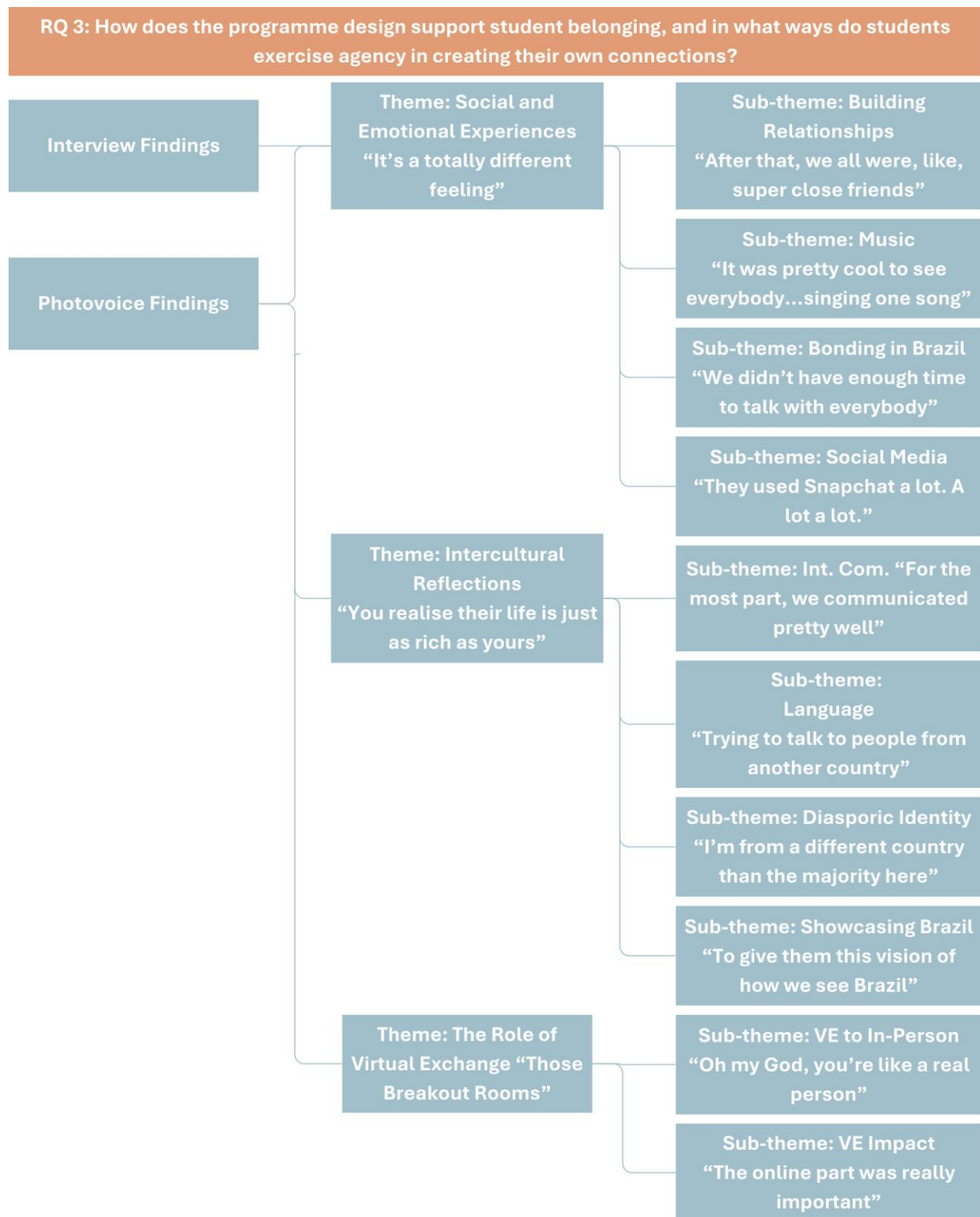
**RQ 3:** How does the programme design support student belonging, and in what ways do students exercise agency in creating their own connections?

Drawing from interviews and photo elicitation submissions, it explores the role of social and emotional experiences in fostering student community building, both virtually and in person. Themes like “Building Relationships” and “Music” highlight how shared interests and creative activities helped to break down barriers and promote collaboration, while “Bonding in Brazil” illustrates how connections deepened during the in-person component. The role of social media throughout the programme is also explored. The VE sections focus on how the virtual component laid the groundwork for in-person interactions by creating initial connections and bridging divides that students initially perceived to exist between themselves and other participants. These findings demonstrate how the programme design supported belonging while allowing students to exercise agency in creating a rich learning experience.

The next three sections explore prominent themes that support the findings for RQ 3. These themes include Social and Emotional Experiences, Intercultural Reflections, and Virtual Exchange, as outlined in Figure 31. Figure 32 presents a side-by-side comparison of how often each code was applied to Brazilian and U.S. transcripts for these three themes. In addition to listing the actual frequency counts, the visual includes proportionally sized circles to offer an intuitive sense of the scale between the two groups.

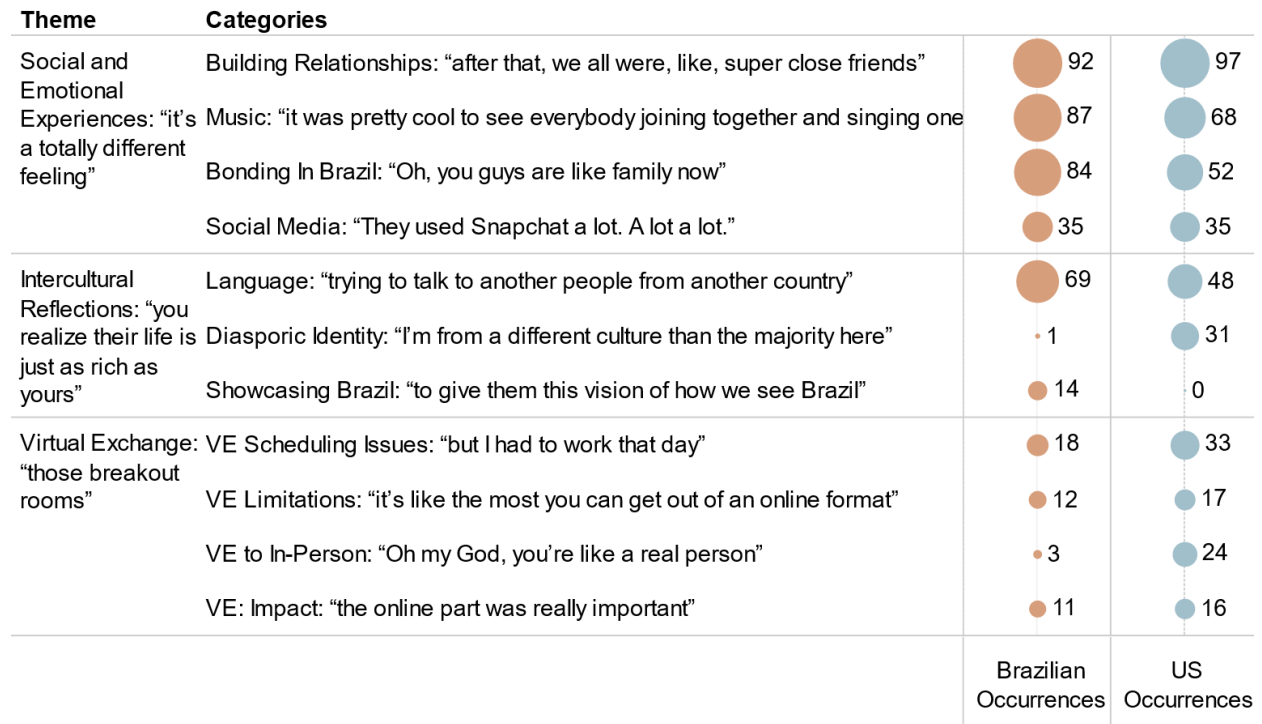
**Figure 31**

*Summary of Data for RQ 3*



**Figure 32**

*Comparative Frequency of Themes and Categories Explored in RQ 3*

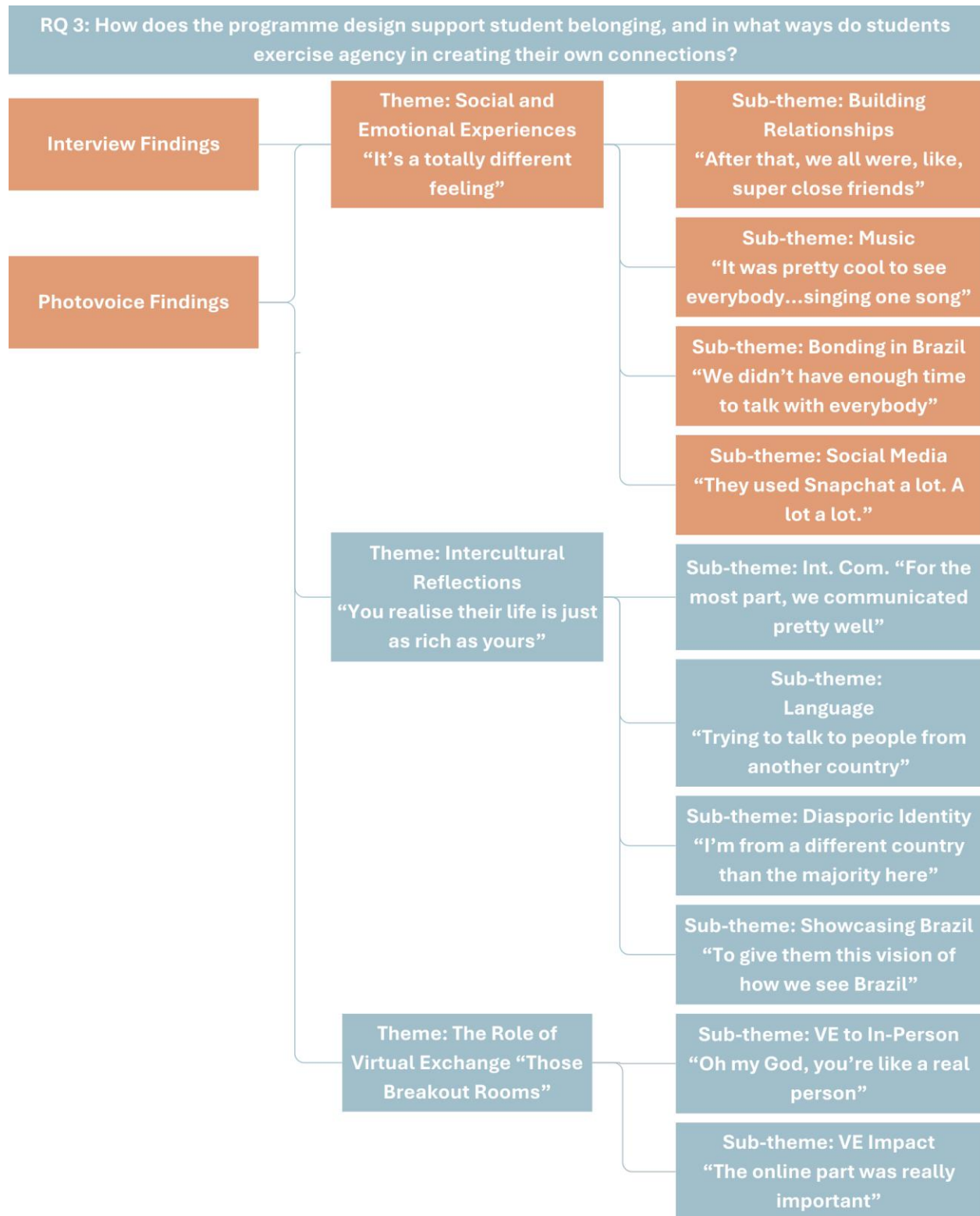


**Theme One: Social and Emotional Experiences: "It's a Totally Different Feeling"**

In reflecting on their participation in the programme, students frequently brought up experiences that were profoundly impactful in terms of social interactions and emotions. Significant codes related to this category include overall social and emotional experiences, descriptions of relationship formation, the significance of music in fostering connections, the opportunity to get to know each other face-to-face in Brazil, and the role of social media in creating and maintaining connections. The ways in which this fits into the overall data supporting RQ 3 is outlined in Figure 33 and a breakdown by country of origin is provided in Figure 34.

**Figure 33**

*Overview of Data for RQ 3 Highlighting Interview Findings for Social and Emotional*



**Figure 34**

*Social and Emotional Experiences*

Theme	Categories	Brazilian Occurrences	US Occurrences
Social and Emotional Experiences: “it’s a totally different feeling”	Building Relationships: “after that, we all were, like, super close friends”	92	97
	Music: “it was pretty cool to see everybody joining together and singing one”	87	68
	Bonding In Brazil: “Oh, you guys are like family now”	84	52
	Social Media: “They used Snapchat a lot. A lot a lot.”	35	35

Within the theme of “Social and Emotional Experiences,” four categories are explored: Building Relationships, Music, Bonding in Brazil, and Social Media.

***Subtheme One: Building Relationships: “After That, We All Were, Like, Super Close Friends”***

Under the overarching theme “Social and Emotional Experiences,” the most prominent category was “Building Relationships” represented by the in vivo code “After That, We All Were, Like, Super Close Friends.” Every student interviewed ( $n = 23$ ) had at least one part of their transcript connected with this code related to building relationships and developing friendships. Significantly, friendship and relationship building was not something specifically asked about in the interviews.

One of the ways in which students described building relationships was through discovering things that they had in common. One Brazilian student, who travelled over 2,500 kilometres from a Northern Brazilian state to join the group in São Paulo described the friendships she forged with two U.S. students. They drew on their common experience of being from smaller, more rural areas:

they both come from, from the countryside of their respective states, and they come from small towns, it's my case, as well...and then we kind of connected with the similarities in our stories, even though we are from different cultures, backgrounds, different countries.

Their lives are not so different. (BR04, 1:94 ¶ 15)

Despite the differences between the rural United States and rural Brazil, the students were able to find ways to bond over the commonalities that they were able to identify.

***Subtheme Two: Music: “It Was Pretty Cool to See Everybody Joining Together and Singing One Song”***

The category, “Music: ‘It Was Pretty Cool to See Everybody Joining Together and Singing One Song’” (Gr=155) is grouped under the category “Social and Emotional Experiences” and is used to label interview excerpts that describe making connections through singing, dancing, playing instruments, or listening to music. This was a category that nearly every interview transcript (21/23) was coded with. Occurring 155 times, it was another significant category that had no relationship to the questions that were asked in the interview. The text coded could be something relatively surface level, like, “overall, we all we like the same type of music, we like same type of movies” (BR04, 1:91 ¶ 15) to something deeper that describes moving out of the comfort zone:

And even some of the more—this is probably just because I'm a very like, I mentioned, I'm a very square person—but getting out and like, the karaoke bar, for example. Like and like dancing with people I barely know and feeling fine about it—that was great.

(US15, 13:92 ¶ 179)

Similarly, this quote reflects the ways in which a shyer student was able to make connections through music: “But at the same time, he was really shy, but when he got that guitar, you know, it went away (BR02, 2:106 ¶ 191).

One U.S. student described Portuguese music as an entry point into his interest in learning Portuguese:

It’s really funny. I um, I’ve been playing solo gigs at wineries and such, just playing guitar and piano and singing for two, three years now. And one of the earliest things that I did is I learned “Girl from Ipanema” in Portuguese. It’s kind of one of the—it’s a novelty kind of thing. But I do it at my gigs. I sing it in Portuguese. I now realise my pronunciation has been horrible this entire time, but that was kind of my entryway. I didn’t even realise the depths of the musical culture of Brazil, but that was, that was the starting point. And then when I joined my band, one of—the drummer turned me on to the song “*Corcovado*,” “Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars,”” and it’s just a beautiful song. And when we visited Christ the Redeemer, which is on Corcovado, the mountain, it just kind of all clicked. And I had been learning a fair amount up to then, stuff, by João Gilberto and Elis Regina, those artists. But then after that, after actually going to Brazil, I’m just, I’m slowly getting into it, and I’m, I’m trying to learn a new song every day now. (US16, 19:43 ¶ 203)

Several students describe the role of music as a way to get to know each other. US18 describes how her initial trepidation about the first meeting of the VE was allayed after the group was able to find a common interest:

Yeah, I was expecting [the first VE meeting] to be really awkward. I was very nervous before class started it that day, but then we were all able to bond somehow over Beyoncé,

like making her like the whole team mascot activity, and like creating a team vibe right off the bat was really helpful. And like getting us to find common ground and just like, common interests. And then we all realised we were interested in music and stuff like that. So, yeah, it was very easy to work with them. After, after, like, the initial conversations that we had. (US18, 20:67 ¶ 71)

US05, was the only U.S. student who participated in the VE but did not travel to Brazil, although she had initially intended to travel with the group. As her photo elicitation submission, she chose a screenshot of a music playlist that her Brazilian teammate had created for the teams. The photo shows a link to the playlist that he created and another team member from the U.S. texting playfully that she hopes she didn't add too many songs to the group playlist. Shortly thereafter the text thread shows that the group chat is renamed *familia*, or “family” in Portuguese, perhaps revealing a growing sense of community and group identity.

**Co-Occurrence of Music and Bonding**

Table 18 shows the co-occurrence of the “music” category with the “virtual exchange” category vs. the “Bonding in Brazil” category. While bonding over music was more prevalent in person in Brazil, music also seems to be a significant way that students got to know each other in the VE. Similarly, US19 described how listening to Brazilian music on the Zoom calls made her even more eager to travel to Brazil (15:38 ¶ 66).

**Table 18**

*Co-Occurrence of “Music” with VE and In-Person Codes*

	<b>Bonding in Brazil (Gr=136)</b>	<b>Virtual Exchange (Gr=208)</b>
<b>Music (Gr=155)</b>	46	16

While students frequently mentioned music as a way to connect during the in-person component—whether through samba, karaoke, or other group activities—the importance of music extended beyond these moments. Several students highlighted how music served as a broader bridge between identities, fostering connections organically. For example, BR02, a guitar player, described forming a meaningful bond with two American guitar players, a relationship that extended beyond the programme.

like, friendships that I did make with like, you know, US16, US12, that also brings joy to like my musical side of it, because here in Brazil, if I'm being honest... we don't—schools don't teach like music as, you know, in grade classes... And to have that sort of connection with them and just you know, we have like already kind of a song, going with everybody and just creating a song... (BR02, 2:27 ¶ 257)

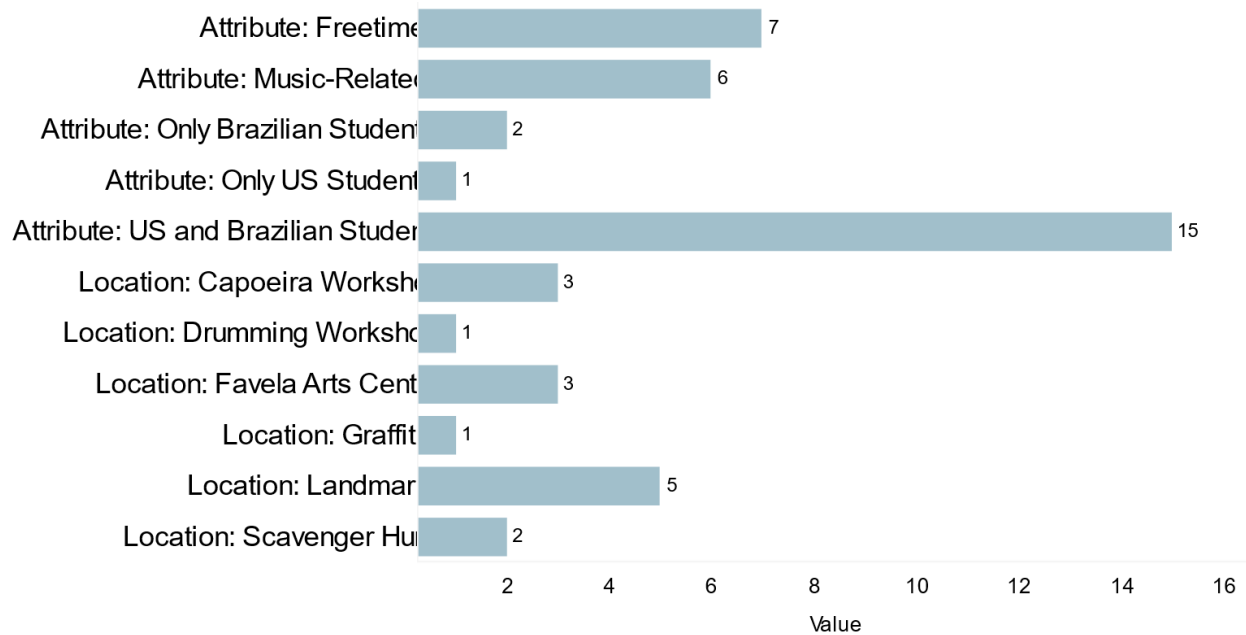
Even after the programme ended, these students continued to collaborate on musical projects, illustrating the lasting impact of music on their connections.

### **Photo Elicitation Submissions in Relation to Music**

The photo elicitation submissions shed additional light on the role that music played in students' experiences as it relates to RQ 3. As part of the interview, students were asked to find a picture or a screenshot that “represents a moment of cultural immersion or cultural learning that took place during the programme.” Figure 35 shows a summary of the major categories that the photo elicitation submissions fell into. They include attributes, like the composition of American and Brazilian students in the group, and they also include the location where the photos were taken.

**Figure 35**

*Photo Elicitation Submissions by Attribute and Location*



Six of the 23 submissions are related to music. These included photos from *capoeira*, the drumming workshop, from musical events that happened during their free time, and a screenshot from a musical playlist that the students compiled during the VE. The majority of the photos contain both U.S. and Brazilian students showing that these moments occurred alongside their exchange partners.

In line with RQ 3’s focus on belonging, the photos that the students selected show how music served as a point of connection. In another music-related photo elicitation submission, US08 shared a picture of him with his arm around BR13 after the conclusion of a drumming workshop that the students participated in. He said:

And it was really after we were all playing together, playing the drums, and there’s kind of like the build-up to this picture. So, we were all playing the drums, and each group is going one at a time, like and then once you hear everything all together, it kind of builds

this, like harmonious or synchronous performance. And if you had put us there at the beginning of the year not knowing each other, I don't think it would have been at all what we performed... Because at the beginning of the drumming class, we were horrible, and then by the end, we were like, okay, okay, like, this is, this is kind of impressive, like, we're all drumming at the same time. We're not, like, falling off rhythm. And it was in a span of an hour and a half, and we all we built all these relationships in the span of four days (US08).

The Brazilian friend with whom he posed also submitted a photo elicitation from that event. This one was taken from a bird's-eye view and showed the entire group in the act of playing their drums. His reflection mirrored US08's in terms of thinking about how the group came together in a special way when playing the drums at the same time, "I think this type of music really involves *us*, right? You want to—like every part, like, every part of the music is important. So, if you're not playing the drum, the music is not full; it's not complete. It's like you have a big meaning" (BR13). Ultimately, music facilitated connections during both the virtual and in-person components of the programme, fostered relationships that grew over the course of the programme, and in some cases, endured beyond the programme experience.

The prominence of music-related codes both in terms of overall number and prevalence across 21/23 transcripts indicates that music shaped the programme experience for many students. This was an unanticipated finding, not prompted by interviews. Shared musical interests created a common foundation that students could build on. This enabled them to move into less familiar territory. In some way, these small acts like singing karaoke or learning a new Brazilian song functioned as "micro risks" that worked to gradually move students out of their comfort zone. The belonging that they found in shared musical tastes provided a basis of safety

from which they could take on new micro-risks, leading to both new knowledge and a stronger sense of community.

***Subtheme Three: Bonding in Brazil: “Oh, You Guys Are Like Family Now”***

A subtheme of “Social and Emotional Experiences” is “Bonding in Brazil: ‘Oh, You Guys Are Like Family Now’” (Gr=136). This theme describes the deep connections that students built while spending time together in Brazil. This subtheme is exemplified by a Brazilian student who describes her surprise at making such a strong connection with a U.S. student in person after meeting with him weekly on Zoom for several months. She reflects, “I was not expecting him to be like what I met in person. I told him like ‘you are one of my favourite persons ever.’ I—it was crazy how I didn’t saw that virtually, you know?” (BR11, 5:250 ¶ 96). While the in-person experience in Brazil was essential to creating this sense of belonging, these relationships neither began nor ended in Brazil. Students’ use of social media will be explored in the next section to describe the ways in which students’ connections transcended the boundaries of the programme.

***Subtheme Four: Social Media: “They Used Snapchat a Lot. A Lot a Lot”***

Social media played a significant role in students’ experiences both during the VE and after the programme ended. During my classroom observations I discovered that some teams were using Instagram messaging rather than email, WhatsApp, or other communication methods, which allowed them to learn more about each other via social media even as they were communicating in the context of the business case that they were working on.

Initially, there were some learning curves involved in students’ preferred social media platforms, with Brazilians preferring WhatsApp and most Americans having never downloaded it prior to the VE. Early in the programme, U.S. students had to be instructed to both download it and turn on notifications since students in the prior year had not been receiving notifications and

therefore not checking their messages. Using it only for the group project had given them less incentive to check it. Using a common social media platform caused them to check their messages more frequently. Nevertheless, there was not consensus on the best platform to use. One Brazilian student expressed scepticism of the idea of using Snapchat, which one of her American teammates had suggested. The idea was rejected, since, as she argued, “I think the message goes away once you see it?” (BR03, 4:94 ¶ 67), and opted to communicate on Instagram instead. In a sense, the process of selecting a communication platform served as an initial opportunity for students to navigate differences in technology use, setting the stage for broader collaboration and adaptation throughout the programme.

Social media played a notable role in the U.S. students’ pre-departure preparation, offering a virtual gateway to Brazil. Some students used these platforms to form expectations about what they would encounter, for example, one student reflected on how exposure to visual content shaped their perception of Brazil’s scenery:

I was like on a social media platform or that I saw was like, basically like their scenery and how like they have a lot of beaches and just how colourful it was. So, I think like even just going through the plane and going to like, once you hit Rio or hit like São Paulo, you saw like the vibrance and like the different colours. So I expected it to be you know, very vibrant, very bright, and I think that’s like what I saw. (US09, 14:54 ¶ 168)

Another student emphasised the way online videos provided an immersive preview of the environment she would encounter:

I watched a lot of videos beforehand. Yeah. Like what it’s like it was like people just taking you down the street. Like a 360 camera. I found a video on YouTube. So, I kind of knew what it was going to look like going in. (US20, 10:67 ¶ 162)

Social media was useful for preparing the students, but it also extended into the students' lived experience during the exchange and afterward. For the participants, these platforms provided a channel for cross-cultural connection beyond the programme's official timeline. One student, for instance, explained how maintaining contact with Brazilian peers through platforms like Snapchat became part of her daily routine after the programme ended:

we're all following each other on social media. So, like, sometimes we'll like comment on each other's posts, or it's like I posted recently that I had watched a movie and one of the students told me that they were gonna watch it too. And then one of them on Snapchat—do you know what Snapchat streaks are? It's basically like, you send a picture back forth every single day. So, like every single day, we send a new picture. (US15, 13:88 ¶ 113)

While onsite in Brazil, a group of American and Brazilian students mentioned that they had been watching a TV series on a streaming channel together and shared their thoughts about the programme via WhatsApp message, which allowed them to find another form of shared interest. The students' use of social media, both in preparation and throughout the exchange, highlights how virtual interactions are not just extensions of the programme, but are integral elements of the ways in which students approach the world.

It is important to note that the "depth" of interaction was not consistently fulfilling to the participants. One Brazilian student, for instance, commented on the superficial nature of online communication, remarking that since the programme ended, "We haven't talked, we just interact on Instagram" (BR11, 5:224 ¶ 228). And while some students mentioned maintaining an active group chat with their international peers that was still active at the time of the interviews, social media did not always foster a sense of connection for everyone. For the one U.S. student (US05),

who was unable to travel to Brazil due to unexpected obligations, as she followed the programme through social media posts, she described feeling somewhat excluded:

It was so sad seeing all my friends post on Instagram, but they had a blast, and it looked like an amazing trip, and I got to talk to them and see how their trip went, all the places they went, and it sounded amazing. I wish I wish I was there, but I'm glad they had fun.  
(US05, 23:84 ¶ 63)

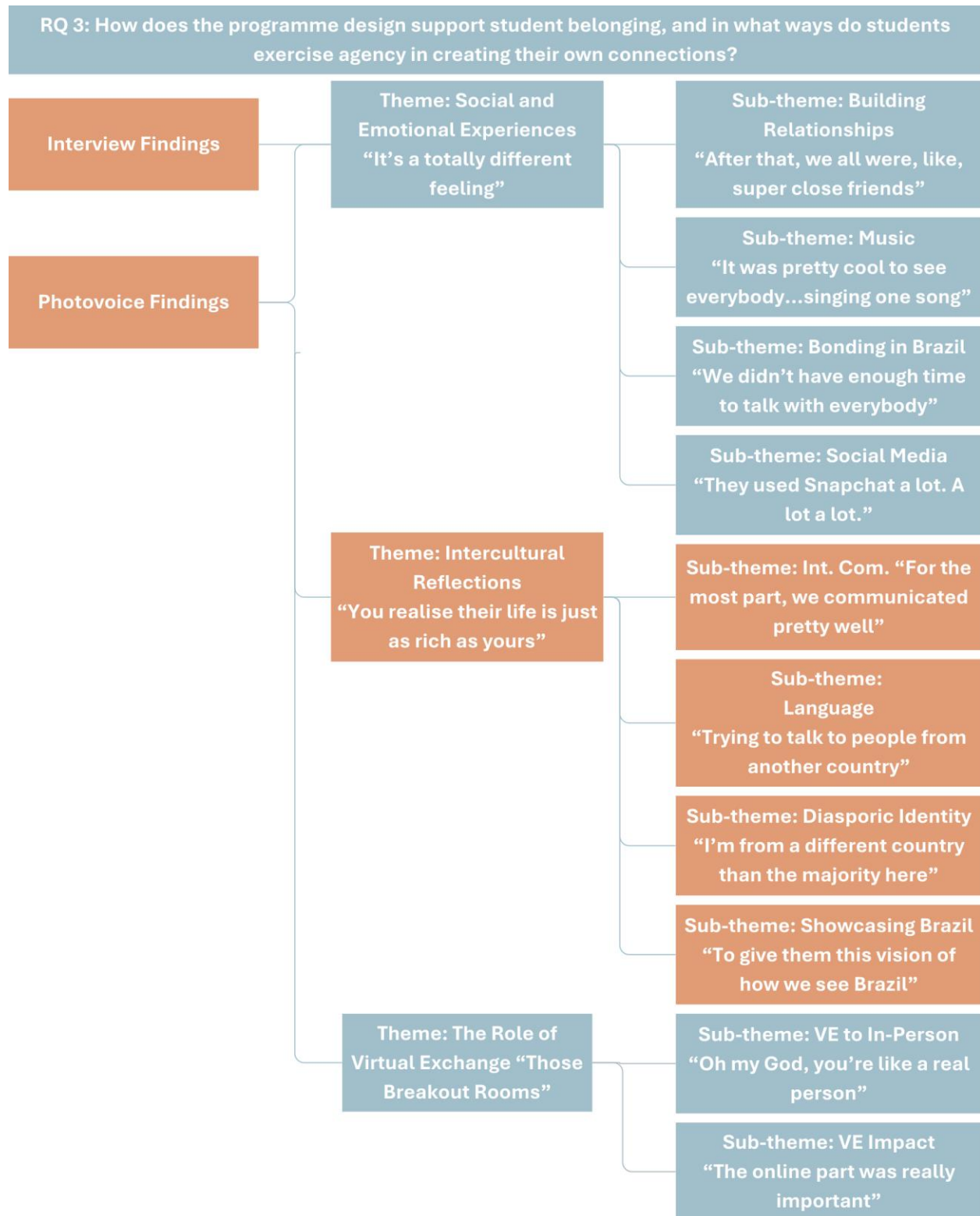
These reflections from the photo elicitation suggest that while social media helped to sustain group interactions, it may also lead to some feelings of disengagement or lack of connection, despite efforts to stay engaged.

### **Theme Two: Intercultural Reflections: “You Realise Their Life Is Just as Rich as Yours”**

The second subtheme from the interviews and photo elicitation submissions explores the ways in which students engaged in intercultural reflection as participants in this programme. Within this category are topics related to intercultural communication, language, diasporic identity, and showcasing Brazil. These findings illustrate how students moved beyond initial preconceptions, encountered challenges in communication, and discovered shared experiences that allowed them to bridge cultural divides. Figure 36 shows where this fits into the overall data to support RQ 3 and outlines the four categories that are explored as part of the “Intercultural Reflections” theme.

Figure 36









Overview of Data for RQ 3 Highlighting Interview Findings Related to IC Reflections



Before discussing the interviews, it is useful to return to the survey data related to intercultural development. These data, consistent with other questions, show a V-shaped trend over the three stages, with scores dipping in Phase 2 before rebounding to higher levels in Phase 3 for six out of eight survey questions. This trend is observed across the combined U.S. and Brazilian cohorts. The highest overall average score of 4.02 was achieved in Phase 3, highlighting a culmination of the programme’s impact on participants’ intercultural development and reflection. These findings provide a valuable lens through which to interpret the students’ experiences and growth over time and to reflect on the ways in which students still felt they had room to grow in this area after the conclusion of the VE (see Table 19).

**Table 19**

*Intercultural Development Survey Questions Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3 All Students*

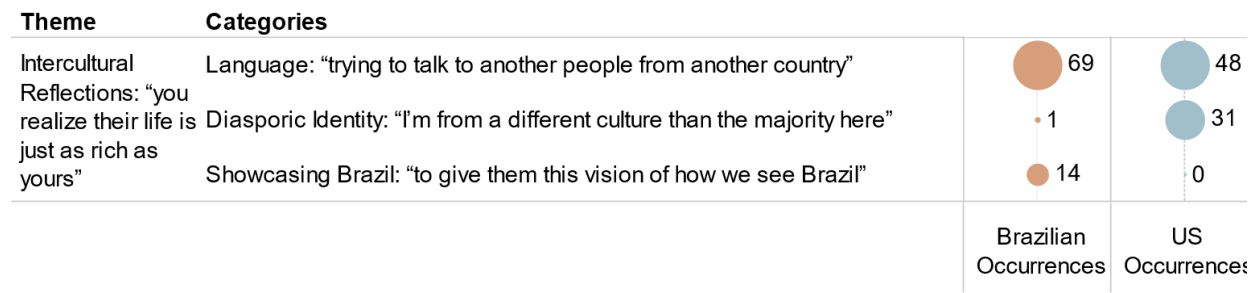
<b>Question Topic:</b>	<b>P1 AVG</b>	<b>P2 AVG</b>	<b>P3 AVG</b>	<b>Trendline</b>
<b>Effective IC Interactions</b>	4.29	3.96	4.25	
<b>Get to Know Different People</b>	4.15	3.76	4.65	
<b>Expanded Worldview</b>	4.24	3.93	4.45	
<b>Knowledge of Global Affairs</b>	3.90	3.41	4.10	
<b>Understand Different Cultures</b>	4.21	3.80	4.32	
<b>Understand Own Biases</b>	3.81	3.78	4.21	
<b>Tolerance for Ambiguity</b>	3.53	3.51	3.86	
<b>Cross-Cultural Com</b>	4.20	3.96	4.13	

The theme of “Intercultural Reflections,” represented by the in vivo code “You realise their life is just as rich as yours,” emerged 231 times across the data. This theme captures the transformative nature of students’ experiences as they moved beyond initial stereotypes and assumptions about others. Within this broad category, there are several significant codes relating

to intercultural reflections, including: language, diasporic identity, and “showcasing Brazil” (see Figure 37).

**Figure 37**

*Interview Findings on Intercultural Reflection*



There were two major differences between U.S. and Brazilian students in this section, with U.S. student transcripts frequently coded with “Diasporic Identity” and Brazilian student transcripts frequently coded with “Showcasing Brazil.”

One U.S. student reflected on how meeting peers in person changed their preconceived notions that they had formed during the virtual interactions:

Oh, yeah, it was, it was different, right? You know, it’s, it’s easy to think, “Oh, they’re just on a screen.” You know, not gonna ever really meet them, get to know them, and then you do meet them and get to know and realise that you know their life is just as rich as yours, if not richer, and that they’re—they’re immersed in this culture, and it’s just incredibly cool to find the similarities too, because that was because that was the initial thing. (US08, 19:101 ¶ 107)

The recognition of shared humanity can be seen as a key outcome of the exchange, which is the development of empathy and the ability to value others’ experiences. Moving from the virtual to the in-person interactions allowed this student to see participants in a deeper way and to create meaningful connections.

In several cases, students made connections between their home culture and what they were learning about the U.S. or Brazil. One U.S. student, US24, had grown up in an urban environment in the U.S. and reflected on the parallels between public housing in the U.S. and the experience of visiting a *favela*. His experience visiting a youth arts organisation in a *favela* within Rio de Janeiro was the source of his photo elicitation reflection. In his photo, he used the forward-facing camera lens to include himself in the frame, as well as the arts organisation and the children who were there for class. He reflects:

Yeah, the *favela*. It was a great opportunity to reflect back on how certain areas in the world can all be really similar. There's a lot of similarities, and how nobody, like nobody's country or city, is perfect. I know when the tour guide, when he was like speaking to us about the history, I felt connected with him because he was talking about, like, the crime and how people there, like, they actually try to protect each other and things like that, but talking about its safety, like trying to tell us that it's safe over there, like, really safe and things like that. And although that might not apply to certain places or like places in Chicago, I feel like one thing that I've been trying to tell myself, no matter what I'm going through, or, you know, how I may live, just like, there's like beauty in the struggle. So, like, even though it didn't look super—even though it didn't look super nice or like, you know, really clean, it was just the fact that people are united together. Not everybody is like, you know, have a lot of lot of income, or doesn't look like, you know, it's not poverty. But, you know, people still come out to see other people in the community, see each other grow. It does look like a strong unit of people that, you know, share similar values, and even just that one thing of like using [musical]

instruments to stop people from doing crime and, you know, violence and things like that.

(US24, 16:48 ¶ 120)

His reflection shows how intercultural experiences can transcend seemingly disparate contexts.

Again, his comments reinforce the idea of shared humanity.

Another interesting subset of this category was related to intra-Brazilian differences. It is important to understand that some of the Brazilian students came from geographically distant parts of Brazil, far from the Southeast of Brazil which is the most populated and economically developed region and houses both Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Yet even within their own cities, there were socio-economic differences that they understood as being significant. One student commented that she did not feel that she could provide a lot of orientation to São Paulo to the American visitors because the group was not staying in a part of the city she was familiar with. “I don’t go to that side of São Paulo so much. Because it’s more rich, that side of São Paulo. So, it’s not something I know so much” (BR07 ¶ 184, 08:35). Another student’s reflections echo this. She reflected on the ways in which, had she and another Brazilian student met face-to-face without having the VE, their interactions would have been much different:

She’s great. And I loved to meet her and, and we had a really great connection, and we talked, and I don’t think I would do that if we had only met face to face. I think she would be in one group, and I would be in another—and we wouldn’t talk at all. And I wouldn’t know anything about [another Brazilian student] either. He also was somebody I don’t know if I was going to be friends with. I think everybody I think I would be in a very like—the girls from São Paulo probably would be in a group. We from Rio probably in another group. I think it’ll be much harder for us to connect. I think the online part, made possible for us to be friends with different people from different groups and mix it

all like—I could sit with people that I probably wouldn't talk to, you know. (BR11, 5:242 ¶ 258)

This quote shows how the VE was able to break down socio-economic barriers and enable students to forge connections across class and geographic borders. In some ways, the structured nature of the VE required students to move out of their usual social groups and create relationships with people with whom they would not normally interact. Transcripts coded with “Intercultural Reflections” showed students moved beyond viewing culture as a set of differences to navigate and toward seeing people who are complex individuals with rich lives and stories that often intersect with their own. The virtual component helped disrupt existing social groupings and foster new connections, while the in-person experience allowed these connections to deepen.

***Subtheme One: Language: “Trying to Talk to People from Another Country” (Gr=117)***

Another major category within the “Intercultural Reflections” theme was “Language,” characterised by the in vivo code “Trying to Talk to People from Another Country” (Gr=117). Within this theme, students discuss the value of learning English but also reflect on linguistic and communication challenges.

Brazilian students frequently described the idea that practising English with native speakers would be a valuable experience:

So I have a lot of practicing in listening to other people speaking in English, but like the opportunity to talk with native speakers, it's something unique is the best way of learning because—because even though you can practice by in college too, because I studied international relations, and most of the textbooks were in English, you can you can be a great listener can be you can read well, you can even write well in English, but to speak

well, I think that the best way is talking to native people. So, I think that having the opportunity to get in touch with the students with the professors it was very lively.

(BR04 1:92 ¶ 11)

In some ways, this highlights the gap between formal English education and real-world exposure. Yet one Brazilian student describes how difficult it can be to access both formal and informal opportunities for English:

Oh, it was like my dream to learn English and to know and a little bit more so I—but I didn't have like the opportunity to pay for a course for many—for a long time. So, I used to study by watching series, listening to music, and like highlighting words I don't—I didn't know. And trying to observe that. But then when I was like 15 years old, my mom save her money to buy me a course and it was—I don't want to cry but—there was a really great opportunity to me to like know about more of the language and improve my language because here in Brazil, like it seems like it seems different because we went to this programme like one week and everybody talks in English but the reality is like less than 10% of the population knows English knows how to speak English. So, it was a privilege to me to my mom to save money for this course and know English. She—it opened so many doors like this one for me. So, I'm really, really grateful for my mom for doing this. (BR13, ¶ 71)

This sheds light on the ways in which opportunities to develop English skills can be difficult to access and may provide insight into the ways in which the opportunity to work with native English speakers and improve language skills was a significant motivation for the Brazilian students to participate.

One of the recurring challenges in intercultural communication involved the use of terms that seem familiar but carry different meanings across cultural contexts. As one Brazilian student noted, explaining the concept of a “public college” was unexpectedly difficult despite using the same terminology:

And it’s hard for us to explain what is a public college in Brazil? Because it’s different from the United States. And we were there. And I was trying to make [the U.S. students] understand the best that I can like, “Do you see all of that?! It is all for free. You don’t pay anything!” ...And for me it was really funny because I understood how—how hard it is because we are saying the same thing. I’m saying, “public college,” you have public college United States. But here it’s a totally different thing and it has the same—the same name. (BR11,47:31¶329)

Participants also found value in improving their intercultural communication skills. A U.S. participant reflected on the significance of small moments like learning how to work alongside individuals from different backgrounds, understanding subtle cultural cues, and adapting communication styles:

But the way I saw it was having the opportunity to kind of like immerse yourself in another culture and really learn about their style of living their way of communication, their way of business, which was kind of one of the main points of this. But I think it’s super helpful because now not only in a work environment, you have your own perspective and your own ideas. But now you have like this more diverse perspective, you can understand people coming from different from a different background, what they’re trying to say and kind of why they’re trying to say it.... I think it’s like the small things that like add up. And I was kind of like, what I really liked about the trip is like, I

didn't think I was gonna go with like this big change, like a big like growth of myself. But I noticed like a lot of like small things that like I started doing or that I picked up doing in Brazil. And I think that's kind of what made the trip so much, like, so valuable to me and how I'm going to use that like in my future going forward. (US04, 19:11 ¶ 166).

These students were able to understand firsthand the complexities of intercultural communication and to experience how it involves more than exchanging information or sharing a common language. Understanding cultural nuances and approaching interactions with a sense of adaptability and patience were paramount.

***Subtheme Two: Diasporic Identity: "I'm From a Different Country Than the Majority Here"***

While institutional demographic data for the U.S. students does not indicate whether their family immigrated recently to the United States, a significant number of students discussed this aspect of their family history in their interviews or while on site in Brazil. This includes recent family immigration from India (4 students), Mexico (5 students), East Asia (2 students), East Africa (1 student), West Africa (1 student), and Eastern Europe (1 student). Thus, while the majority of the U.S. students were born in the United States, they also had strong ties to diasporic heritage. Among the Brazilian students, none mentioned any familial ties outside of Brazil, but three students mentioned that their parents had migrated from more rural parts of Brazil to the bigger cities for economic opportunities. Two of the U.S. students with diasporic identities described the ways in which their engagement with intercultural topics throughout the VE triggered them to reflect on their own upbringing and their own diasporic identity. US05, who participated in the VE but did not travel to Brazil, reflects:

My parents, in the beginning, they weren't like, "Americanised." They were still, like, going off of what they learned in Kenya and Somalia. So, seeing them adapt to America throughout the years and how they changed, I really didn't think about it that much until I read the book [*The Culture Map*]. And then I was like, "wait." I talked to my mom about it. I was like, telling her, like, cool things I learned within the chapters. And she was like, "yeah, like, I had to adapt." I think a big thing would be greeting, because in the book, it talked about all the different like perspectives on how people greet. And my parents, they're very like loving like. They love giving like, hugs and like kisses on the cheeks. But I feel like in America, a lot of people aren't like that. They usually say like, "hi" [US05 waves at the camera] and my mom thought it was rude in the beginning. And she was like, "Why aren't they like giving me a hug?" Like, so I think that was, like a big thing that she had to adjust to, the greetings. Because, again, that's something that we don't really think about. But that is, like a big impact on a first impression when you're meeting someone. That was a big thing that I thought about, and especially talked about with my mother. (US05, 23:106 ¶ 168)

Similarly, a U.S. student with strong familial ties to Eastern Europe talked about similarities that she noticed between Brazil and Eastern Europe:

But somehow, in Eastern Europe and Latin America, I feel like, yes, people stay professional, but they're not afraid to mix personal in business in the same way, I think... And I've definitely noticed that that's the culture [in Bulgaria], too. People don't always, you know, they'll try and get their work done, but at the end of the day, people's main goals is—they don't have some kind of professional persona. I think it's kind of hard to explain, but also one of the bigger differences is, you know, America has the stereotype

of people being workaholics, and that people live to work there. And obviously that doesn't go for everybody, but compared to other countries such as Bulgaria and Brazil, they definitely, you can definitely see the difference that people [in Bulgaria] work to be able to live, and even when they're working, they're still, I don't know, their relationships seem more authentic and open, and there's just a lot of smaller differences like that. And then even with just the way people interact with one another, I just watched the Brazilians interact with each other, and it just reminded me of things I've seen [in Bulgaria]. (US11, 22:84 ¶ 70)

These reflections both show how the programme encouraged students to think about their own norms and values and enabled them to apply those ideas beyond simply the U.S. and Brazilian context so they could make their own connections in contexts that were relevant to them.

***Subtheme Three: Showcasing Brazil: “To Give Them This Vision of How We See Brazil”***

It became evident during the in-person component in Brazil that many of the Brazilian students felt a strong desire to share their culture with the American visitors. Several students expressed pride in representing their country, particularly when it was showcased positively during company visits or class sessions. This also came out in the interviews as a Brazilian student reflected on the excitement and personal significance of acting as an informal cultural ambassador:

Honestly, I loved it because I felt myself as a tour guide. They were asking me questions about São Paulo and everything. And I love Brazil. And love São Paulo so I was really glad about answering all those questions. And it was really nice to me, and all the time that it was in there answering their questions or helping them to find a place to eat or a place to go, I was thinking if it was the opposite, because if I was in like abroad or

something like this, I would expect people to be nice to me and to help me. So, I was always trying to be the same thing for them. (BR09, 8:113 ¶ 198)

The Americans likewise expressed gratitude for the hospitality that their Brazilian counterparts exhibited.

I think that the entire trip to Brazil was probably 10 times what it will be without them you know, like they help us out so much not just understanding but guiding us on what to do and how things actually work in Brazil. And I think that towards the end of the programme it was it was pretty sad really because we became such close friends within those two weeks. And I think it was kind of it was pretty sad, honestly. But the entire trip because of them was really it was really good. And I think like even at night when we just chatted in our hotel room and talked about like what they like to do for fun and things. Like that was a great way to it was a great way for us to bond and get to know each other. (US23, 6:85 ¶ 62)

One Brazilian student described how her participation in the programme had allowed her to be a tourist within her own city:

I have never ride the train on the Aqueducts before. I did that with them for the first time. And for me it was like, “oh my God, I’m doing something new my own city!” Just because they they’re here with me. So, for me, I ended up doing a lot of things for the first time. Because you guys were here. (BR11 22:20, ¶ 162)

Finally, one of the students described feelings of pride while learning about the innovative work that several Brazilian companies were doing in the sustainability realm:

We think “oh, they [US, Europe] have so much more things than we do, and things like that. But in Brazilian business, sustainable Brazilian business, like we’re so nice. I was like, proud of my country. I was like “Yeah, Brazil!” (BR03 32:54 ¶ 264)

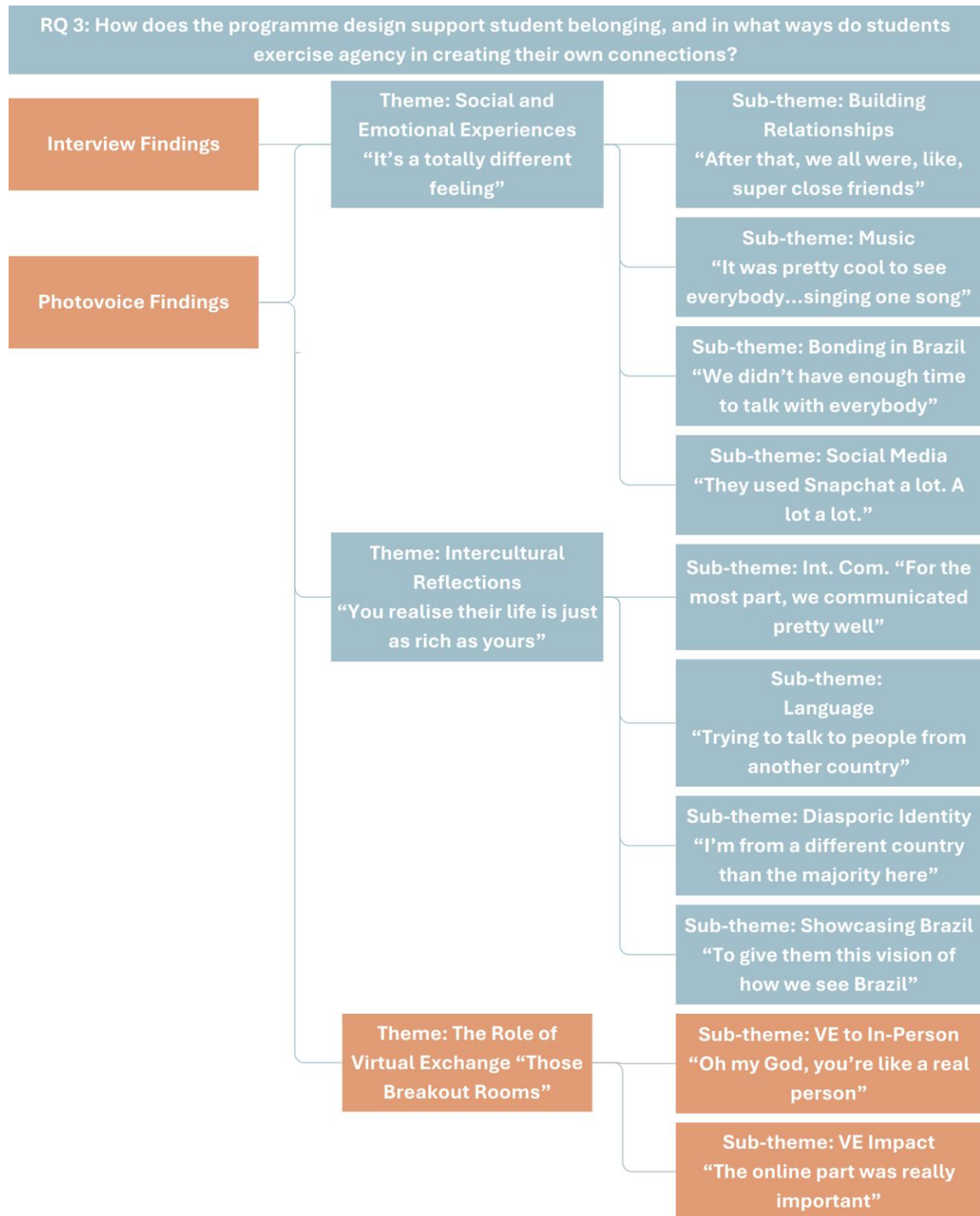
The role of the Brazilian students as informal cultural ambassadors was prominent in the interviews. Twenty transcripts are coded with the in vivo code, “Each group had a Brazilian explaining what was going on” which referred to instances where the Brazilian students took the lead in explaining something to the Americans while they were on-site in Brazil. Seeing Brazil through the eyes of the foreign students fostered further intercultural reflections among the Brazilians. These experiences illustrate how the programme’s design facilitated student belonging by creating structured opportunities for cultural exchange, while also enabling Brazilian students to exercise agency by taking on the role of informal cultural ambassadors to showcase their own vision of Brazil and foster meaningful connections between participants.

### **Theme Three: The Role of the Virtual Exchange in Creating Community**

The third theme related to RQ 3, Agency and Belonging, is the role of the VE in creating community. Students frequently contrasted the VE with the in-person experience, highlighting that the VE was more demanding and less enjoyable compared to the face-to-face interactions. Nevertheless, the VE was essential in laying the groundwork for these relationships to flourish during the face-to-face meetings. Figure 38 shows the data that is used to support the findings related to the VE’s role as it relates to agency and belonging.

**Figure 38**

*Overview of Data for RQ 3 Highlighting Interview Findings Related to the Role of VE*



The subthemes “VE to In-Person” and “VE Impact” are the third and fourth categories that emerged from the interview data related to the VE, with the first two categories discussed under RQ 2. As a summary, within the theme of “Virtual Exchange,” four categories emerged through the coding processes:

- VE Scheduling Issues, represented by the in vivo code “But I had to work that day”  
*(Note: previously explored as part of RQ 2)*
- VE Limitations, represented by the in vivo code “It’s like the most you can get out of an online format”  
*(Note: previously explored as part of RQ 2)*
- VE to In-Person, represented by the in vivo code “Oh my God, you’re like a real person”  
*(Note: Explored in this section as Subtheme One)*
- VE Impact, represented by the in vivo code “The online part was really important.”  
*(Note: Explored in this section as Subtheme Two)*

Figure 39 shows the groundedness of these two themes: “VE to In-Person” and “VE Impact.”

The next two subsections explore in greater depth the role that the VE played as a programmatic feature that fostered belonging.

**Figure 39**

*Virtual Exchange Interview Findings*

Theme	Categories	Brazilian Occurrences	US Occurrence
Virtual Exchange: “those breakout rooms”	VE Scheduling Issues: “but I had to work that day”	18	33
	VE Limitations: “it’s like the most you can get out of an online format”	12	17
	VE to In-Person: “Oh my God, you’re like a real person”	3	24
	VE: Impact: “the online part was really important”	11	16

*Subtheme One: VE To In-Person: “Oh My God, You’re Like a Real Person”*

During our interview, one Brazilian student eagerly asked me, “You know, when you have this actor that you really liked and you’ve been watching a lot of his movies on TV, and then you meet him in person?” This was the setup for her description of meeting her U.S. peers face-to-face for the first time. She, like many others, found the experience of meeting face-to-face to be a truly transformative moment:

You want to talk and want to get to know everything, and like, share experiences. That was the same feeling that I had. So, at the time that we got together, I just looked at everybody and I thought, “Oh my god like I can’t believe I’m like, meeting you guys here!” You travel all across the —like—the continent, just to visit and it was really special. (BR09, 8:11 ¶ 168)

This excitement was echoed by another Brazilian student who described one of her new U.S. friend as “one of my favourite persons ever.” She reflected, “I was not expecting him to be like what I met in person it was crazy how I didn’t saw that virtually, you know? (BR11, 15:05 ¶ 95). Thinking about how different it felt to be together in person, one U.S. student described the fun they were able to have together:

It was way cooler honestly, like the virtual part we talked just about work and like what we liked to do for fun, but then when we were in person, [one student] bought his guitar and played us the guitar and then he—and when we were going out to different places like for the nightlife and stuff, he totally—like it was it was a lot more fun than the virtual portion. (US23, 6:84 ¶ 97–98)

Another U.S. student described seeing one of her teammates for the first time at the lunch buffet that the group went to just after the U.S. group flew into São Paulo:

Yeah, I saw [my Brazilian teammate] at the buffet, but he didn't recognise me at first, and I got a little worried. I was like, "Oh my gosh. Maybe we really just haven't, you know, built up enough of a relationship online. Is it awkward if I introduced myself?" And I started being all nervous, but then I introduced myself, and everything was fine, and he got super excited. And I know one of—two of my other teammates weren't—I don't think they were at the lunch that day, so I met them later on, but they were all very welcoming and very excited to meet in person, and I think that helped bring everything together, definitely, and it just helped strengthen our relationship a lot. Because I do feel like through a screen, you really only do get, you know, a certain extent of your connection. But then we met, and it just it all flowed together very well, and we had already worked together, so there was no awkwardness associated with it or anything. It was more excitement. (US20, 10:6 ¶ 72)

These reflections point toward the ways in which the online interactions contrasted with the in-person meetings. Getting together in person allowed for a level of interaction that they had not gotten in the virtual setting. This face-to-face interaction allowed for more emotional engagement and for relationships to be built at a deeper level.

***Subtheme Two: VE Impact: "The Online Part Was Really Important"***

Notably, this theme is closely aligned with the semi-structured interview question: "*Do you think the virtual teamwork prepared you for your time together?*" This question emerged organically during an early interview when a student expressed curiosity about the researcher's interests, prompting a discussion about the role of the VE. The student's thoughtful response led me to incorporate the question into subsequent interviews, further enriching the data collected on students' perceptions of the VE's impact.

The VE sessions provided students with a base level of familiarity that they could build on once they met in person. The weeks of meeting together may have helped reduce the awkwardness that might have otherwise accompanied their introductions. One Brazilian student shared how the dynamic enabled him to connect more easily with peers:

It would be really more difficult to connect with each other if we don't have these sessions. ... because we have this break, like this wall like, 'Hi, how can I like introduce myself to you?' But like we have the group, and the group connected us to like other people. And so, I saw this from other groups too. Like BR02, BR02 had his group, and connected to me and other people from my group. So, it was really natural. So, it's like preparing a network for a big connection in the in-person part. So, the online part is really important in these terms of like, not only the online part, but this—how can I say—constant, like, constant meetings. Like every week we had a meeting? Two meetings? So, this constant part made us build relationships and connect to each other in person. So, like, they are codependent, right? (BR13, 11:123 ¶ 244–245)

As mentioned previously, several students talked about shyness or introversion as an important dynamic in their relationship building. For some of them, the virtual sessions served as a bridge, making introductions and connections more natural. One student reflected on how these sessions helped ease the process:

For my opinion it was great to know [students] before the meeting then go know them in person because I think like I'm too shy, so I don't just know them in person, directly. I kind of feel—oh, that they talk [to each other] and I don't go there with them. So [without the VE she would be] more shy to talk with. (BR07, 9:00 ¶ 497)

Finally, the VE also facilitated connections across socio-economic divides within the Brazilian group. As mentioned previously, intra-Brazilian connections across geographic and socio-economic divides were more achievable with the VE providing a point of common ground before the in-person exchange. Without the VE, as one Brazilian student explained, "...the girls from São Paulo probably would be in a group. We from Rio probably in another group (BR11, 5:242 ¶ 258).

While the virtual component presented some limitations, it played a crucial role in laying the foundation for successful in-person interactions. The VE allowed students to form initial connections and facilitated a smoother transition into face-to-face engagement. It created opportunities for students to engage with each other who would not have otherwise done so, due to geography, nationality, socio-economic background, or even temperament. As with the survey findings, the interviews underscore the complementary nature of the virtual and in-person components and demonstrate the programme's potential to impact the participants' intercultural, social, and personal development. By shifting the basis of interaction away from pre-existing social circles, the VE disrupted patterns of clique formation. This disruption opened space for new relationships and reshaped group dynamics in ways that promoted broader inclusion. Ultimately, while the in-person interactions provided opportunities for building deep relationships, the VE was crucial in laying the foundation for these experiences, underscoring the complementary nature of the virtual and face-to-face interactions.

### **Summary of Findings for RQ 3**

The findings in this subsection underscore the ways in which the programme and the students themselves fostered belonging through the complementary integration of virtual and in-person components. The VE functioned as an essential scaffold that created initial social

connections. This helped bridge divides related to nationality, socio-economic status, and geography. These initial virtual interactions alleviated student anxiety around in-person encounters and also enabled students to establish common ground and build rapport prior to meeting face-to-face. The subsequent in-person phase capitalised on these foundations, offering structured opportunities for collaboration but also direct engagement with the host environment.

Music was a significant way for students to create connections, and this was frequently discussed in the interviews and prevalent in the photo elicitation submissions. Students also shared reflections on intercultural connections that were meaningful to them and showed their ability to empathise and identify connections between their own experiences and those of other people they met through this exchange. Through these experiences, students exhibited agency by forging meaningful interpersonal connections on their own terms, serving as informal cultural ambassadors even when not expected to, and reflecting on intercultural dynamics in deeply personal ways.

Finally, the students explored the role of the VE in preparing them for the in-person meetings. Ultimately, while the VE had some limitations in terms of students' ability to connect deeply, many students felt that it laid an important foundation for subsequent connections and learning. Collectively, the VE and in-person components facilitated the development of empathy, intercultural competence, and collaborative skills, and demonstrated the programme's ability to foster belonging and to support students in actively shaping their own connections.

### **Differential Benefits**

This section uses survey data and interview findings to address the final research question, RQ 4:

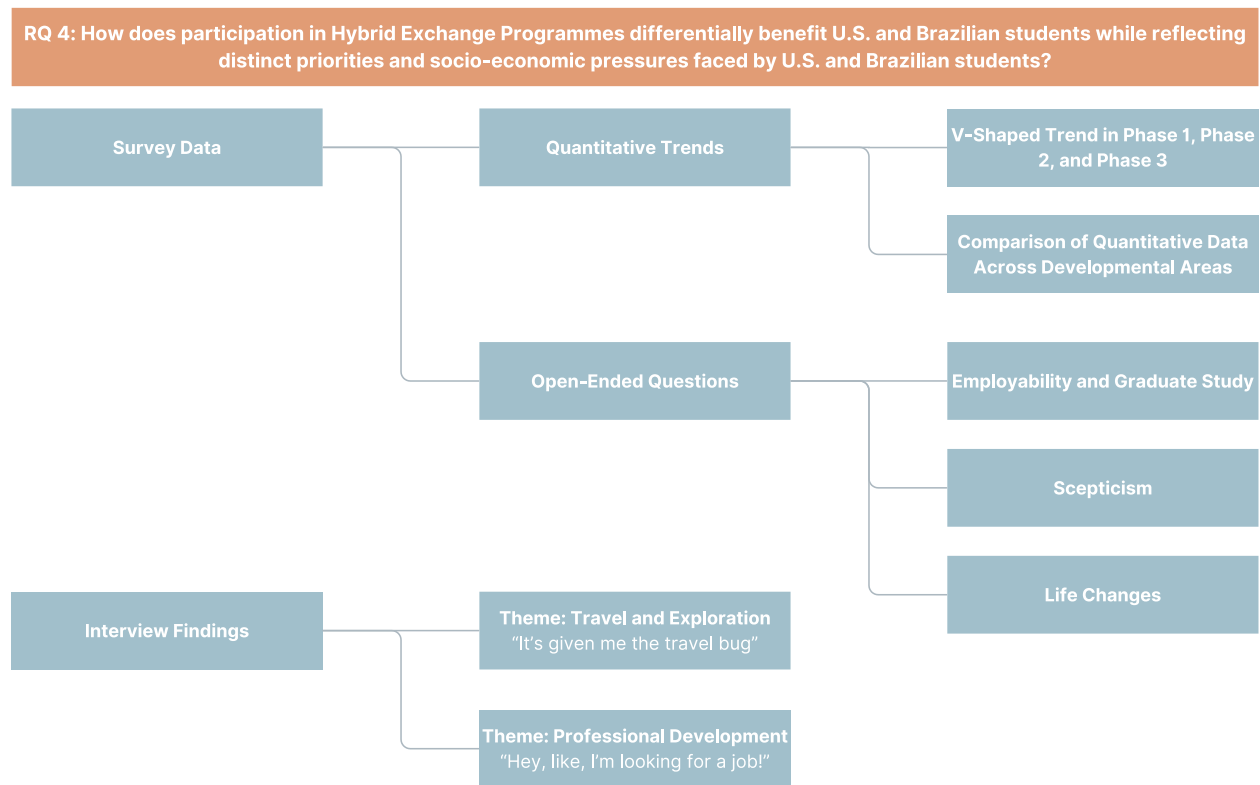
**RQ 4:** How does participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes differentially benefit U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by U.S. and Brazilian students?

This section examines the programme's impact across five thematic areas: personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional development. The survey data provides a quantitative foundation for understanding differences between the U.S. and Brazilian cohorts across the three programme phases (Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3). Complementing this, the interview findings highlight the experiences of students in their own voices, capturing the ways in which the programme influenced their trajectories and addressed their unique socio-economic contexts.

The integration of survey and interview data reveals important contrasts in how U.S. and Brazilian students engaged with and benefited from the programme. U.S. students emphasised growth in intercultural competence and personal development, particularly after returning from Brazil, while Brazilian students placed greater value on professional and linguistic development. The interviews deepen these insights, offering vivid accounts of how Brazilian students used their participation to enhance their career prospects and English proficiency, while U.S. participants reflected on adaptability, and interpersonal growth. Together, these findings present a holistic view of the programme's capacity to meet diverse student needs while fostering shared learning and connection. Figure 40 provides an overview of the sources of data used to support the exploration of this research question.

**Figure 40**

*Overview of Data for RQ 4*



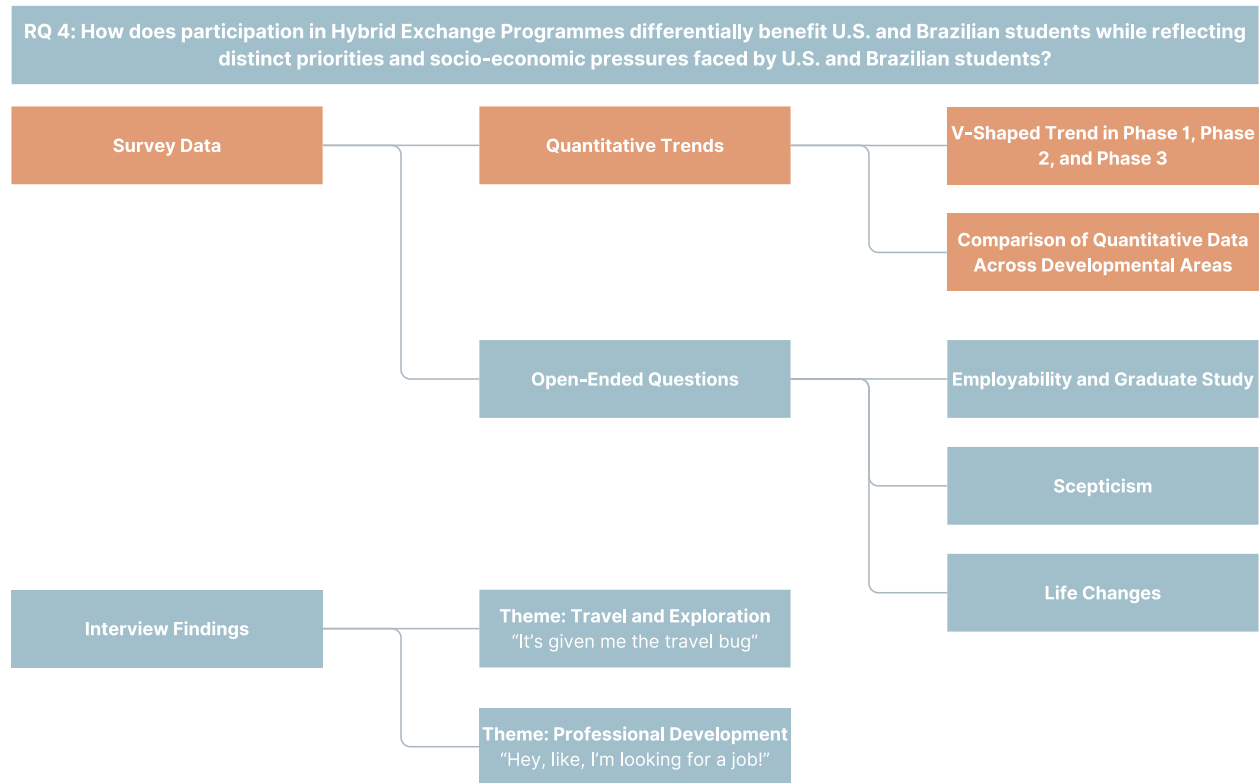
**Quantitative Survey Data to Support RQ 4**

One source of data to support this research question comes from the quantitative survey responses, in particular looking at the trends across the three phases and comparing the data across developmental areas (i.e. personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional).

Figure 41 shows where this fits into the overall framework of data supporting RQ 4.

**Figure 41**

*Overview of Data for RQ 4 Highlighting Quantitative Survey Data*



The quantitative data described in this section are the pooled averages of the Multiple Imputation (MI) data for all students for each question at Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 (see Table 20). The questions in this survey did not originally appear in the grouped order presented here. I have reorganised them into thematic categories to make trends in the data more visible. The first group, *Personal Development* (highlighted in beige), includes questions on maturity, self-confidence, independence, and self-knowledge. The second group, *Intercultural Development* (highlighted in green), covers topics such as effective intercultural interactions, getting to know people from different backgrounds, expanded worldview, knowledge of global affairs, understanding different cultures and personal biases, tolerance for ambiguity, and cross-cultural communication skills. The *Linguistic Development* category (highlighted in orange) focuses on

foreign language skills. The *Academic Development* section (highlighted in blue) includes questions about the impact of faculty and knowledge gained in the chosen field of study. Finally, *Professional Development* (highlighted in red) encompasses questions on employment prospects, career skills development, establishing professional contacts, and gaining an international career perspective. Grouping the questions this way highlights trends and patterns in each area of development. Scores that are highlighted in teal indicate statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the U.S. and Brazilian cohorts, as identified through the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test.

**Table 20**

*Score by Student Country and Phase*

Question Topics:	Brazil P1	Brazil P2	Brazil P3	Brazil Trendline P1, P2, P3	U.S. P1	U.S. P2	U.S. P3	U.S. Trendline P1, P2, P3
Maturity	3.84	3.59	4.10	✓	3.64	3.54	4.14	✓
Self-Confidence	4.01	3.85	3.98	✓	2.95	2.97	3.27	✓
Independence	3.90	3.62	3.71	✓	3.37	3.16	3.57	✓
Self-Knowledge	4.20	3.89	4.20	✓	4.07	3.35	4.21	✓
Effective IC Interactions	4.36	3.91	4.15	✓	4.24	4.00	4.32	✓
Get to Know Different People	4.29	3.64	4.49	✓	4.06	3.83	4.76	✓
Expanded Worldview	4.14	3.74	4.32	✓	4.30	4.05	4.54	✓
Knowledge of Global Affairs	3.88	3.22	3.87	✓	3.92	3.55	4.25	✓
Understand Different Cultures	4.24	3.82	4.20	✓	4.20	3.78	4.39	✓
Understand Own Biases	3.86	3.69	4.09	✓	3.77	3.84	4.30	✓
Tolerance for Ambiguity	3.73	3.39	3.76	✓	3.39	3.59	3.93	✓
Cross-Cultural Communication	4.40	4.07	4.17	✓	4.06	3.88	4.10	✓
Language Skills	4.14	3.59	4.13	✓	3.37	2.21	2.88	✓
Faculty Impact	4.35	4.03	4.34	✓	3.81	3.57	4.02	✓
Knowledge of Field of Study	3.47	3.17	3.56	✓	3.46	2.93	3.01	✓
Employment Prospects	3.77	3.60	3.87	✓	3.47	2.91	3.07	✓
Career Skills Development	4.19	4.06	4.06	✓	3.79	3.62	3.79	✓
Professional Contacts	3.93	3.37	3.98	✓	3.52	3.31	4.05	✓
Int'l Career Perspective	3.97	3.50	3.60	✓	3.96	3.71	3.41	✓

Note: Teal highlighting denotes statistically significant differences between the Brazilian and U.S. cohorts at the corresponding programme phase (per Mann–Whitney *U* tests, *p* < .05).

**Evolving Expectations and Growth Trajectories**

When reviewing the average scores by group, several trends emerge, which are explored in the following sections. First, a prominent V-shaped pattern is evident, with the lowest scores appearing in the Phase 2. Second, U.S. students reported notable intercultural growth after returning from Brazil. Third, scepticism about the programme’s career impact was more pronounced among U.S. participants, contrasting sharply with Brazilian students, who

consistently reported higher scores in professional development across all phases. Finally, linguistic development stood out as a key area of distinction for Brazilian students, further highlighting the differences between the two groups' experiences.

When examining the patterns of Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 responses across the 19 averaged questions for the Brazilian student cohort and 19 averaged questions for the U.S. student cohort ( $n = 38$ ), 33 of these questions display an 'up-down-up' trend, resembling a V-shape, where the lowest score occurred in Phase 2, at the end of the VE. This indicates that in general, the students' expectations for what they hoped to achieve were not met at the end of the VE experience but were typically met by the end of the programme.

### ***Comparison of Personal Development in Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3***

To analyse the quantitative data, the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test was used to identify statistically significant differences between the U.S. and Brazilian students' responses at each phase. Five areas of comparison are described here, including personal development, intercultural development, linguistic development, academic development, and professional development. Brazilian students showed statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) in their Phase 1 and Phase 2 scores related to personal development when compared with the U.S. student cohort scores. In Phase 1, this included significantly higher scores on questions related to maturity, self-confidence, independence, and self-knowledge, and in Phase 2, this included questions related to self-confidence, independence, and self-knowledge (see Table 21).

**Table 21**

*Comparison of Personal Development Scores in Survey Data*

	Brazil P1	Brazil P2	Brazil P3	Brazil Trendline P1, P2, P3	U.S. P1	U.S. P2	U.S. P3	U.S. Trendline P1, P2, P3
Maturity	3.84	3.59	4.10	✓	3.64	3.54	4.14	✓
Self-Confidence	4.01	3.85	3.98	✓	2.95	2.97	3.27	✓
Independence	3.90	3.62	3.71	✓	3.37	3.16	3.57	✓
Self-Knowledge	4.20	3.89	4.20	✓	4.07	3.35	4.21	✓

*Note:* Teal highlighting denotes statistically significant differences between the Brazilian and U.S. cohorts at the corresponding programme phase (per Mann–Whitney *U* tests,  $p < .05$ ).

It is also worth noting that only three questions had “ascender” scores, where average scores increased over Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3. This was visible for the U.S. students in Phase 3, in response to this question: “To what extent has this experience impacted your self-confidence?” This suggests that U.S. students may have initially underestimated the programme’s impact in these areas or that they experienced gradual, cumulative growth in these areas.

***Comparison of Intercultural Development in Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3***

Average scores for questions related to intercultural development are visible in Table 22.

**Table 22**

*Comparison of Intercultural Development Scores in Survey Data*

	Brazil P1	Brazil P2	Brazil P3	Brazil Trendline P1, P2, P3	U.S. P1	U.S. P2	U.S. P3	U.S. Trendline P1, P2, P3
Effective IC Interactions	4.36	3.91	4.15	∨	4.24	4.00	4.32	∨
Get to Know Different People	4.29	3.64	4.49	∨	4.06	3.83	4.76	∨
Expanded Worldview	4.14	3.74	4.32	∨	4.30	4.05	4.54	∨
Knowledge of Global Affairs	3.88	3.22	3.87	∨	3.92	3.55	4.25	∨
Understand Different Cultures	4.24	3.82	4.20	∨	4.20	3.78	4.39	∨
Understand Own Biases	3.86	3.69	4.09	∨	3.77	3.84	4.30	∨
Tolerance for Ambiguity	3.73	3.39	3.76	∨	3.39	3.59	3.93	∨
Cross-Cultural Communication	4.40	4.07	4.17	∨	4.06	3.88	4.10	∨

*Note:* Teal highlighting denotes statistically significant differences between the Brazilian and U.S. cohorts at the corresponding programme phase (per Mann–Whitney *U* tests, *p* < .05).

The U.S. student cohort scored statistically significantly higher in several areas after returning from Brazil. They had significantly higher scores on six out of eight questions related to intercultural competence development after returning from Brazil. These were questions related to the development of effective intercultural communication, getting to know people who are different from you, developing an expanded worldview, enhancing their knowledge of global affairs, developing an understanding of different cultures, and better understanding one’s own bias. They also perceived growth in terms of their maturity and scored significantly higher on that question as well.

“Ascender” scores, where average scores increased over Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 were visible only for U.S. students and only in response to these two questions:

1. “To what extent have you been able to understand your own cultural values and biases because of this experience?”

2. “To what extent has your tolerance for ambiguity increased as a result of this experience?”

Again, these trends suggest that U.S. students may have initially underestimated the programme’s impact in these areas or that they experienced gradual, cumulative growth in these areas.

***Comparison of Linguistic Development in Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3***

The average scores for Brazilian students for this question (3.95) would rank second-highest of all the average scores on the survey, showing the value these students placed on gaining linguistic skills and their overall satisfaction with their progress, as shown via their self-assessment. Table 23 shows the students’ scores related to linguistic development in Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3.

**Table 23**

*Comparison of Linguistic Development Scores in Survey Data*

	<b>Brazil P1</b>	<b>Brazil P2</b>	<b>Brazil P3</b>	<b>Brazil Trendline P1, P2, P3</b>	<b>U.S. P1</b>	<b>U.S. P2</b>	<b>U.S. P3</b>	<b>U.S. Trendline P1, P2, P3</b>
Language Skills	4.14	3.59	4.13	∨	3.37	2.21	2.88	∨

*Note:* Teal highlighting denotes statistically significant differences between the Brazilian and U.S. cohorts at the corresponding programme phase (per Mann–Whitney *U* tests,  $p < .05$ ).

As is explored further in the professional development interview findings, English language competence was a strong motivator for Brazilian students to participate in this programme.

***Comparison of Academic Development in Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3***

Table 24 shows the student scores on the two questions focused more on academics. The questions ask, “To what extent do you think that working with faculty from overseas has

contributed to your intercultural gains?” and “To what extent have you gained knowledge in your chosen field of study through this experience?”

**Table 24**

*Comparison of Academic Development Scores in Survey Data*

Question Topics:	Brazil P1	Brazil P2	Brazil P3	Brazil Trendline P1, P2, P3	U.S. P1	U.S. P2	U.S. P3	U.S. Trendline P1, P2, P3
Faculty Impact	4.35	4.03	4.34	∨	3.81	3.57	4.02	∨
Knowledge of Field of Study	3.47	3.17	3.56	∨	3.46	2.93	3.01	∨

*Note:* Teal highlighting denotes statistically significant differences between the Brazilian and U.S. cohorts at the corresponding programme phase (per Mann–Whitney *U* tests,  $p < .05$ ).

Brazilian students scored significantly higher in Phase 1 for faculty impact and Phase 1 and Phase 3 for gaining knowledge in their chosen field of study. Of the categories related to “Academic Development,” it is noteworthy that “Knowledge of Field of Study” is not only an academic construct, but also closely related to professional development. Likewise, “Linguistic Growth” can also potentially be seen as related to both categories. While there is some conceptual overlap that makes it difficult to fully delineate these areas, the separation is useful in identifying patterns at a broader level.

***Comparison of Professional Development in Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3***

Table 25 shows survey data that compares American and Brazilian scores related to professional development. Teal highlighting indicates statistically significant differences between the U.S. and Brazilian scores with the higher scores highlighted. The orange trendlines indicate a higher score in Phase 1 than in Phase 2 or Phase 3.

The Brazilian student cohort had significantly higher scores in the areas of professional development when compared with the U.S. student cohort ( $p < .05$ ) and this occurred in all three

phases. They had statistically significantly higher scores in 8/12 questions related to professional development. Table 25 replicates this portion of the survey data to show the differences between the U.S. and Brazilian scores related to professional development. Again, Mann-Whitney *U* Test scores with  $p < 0.05$  are highlighted in teal to show significant differences.

**Table 25**

*Professional Development Survey Data*

<b>Question Topics:</b>	<b>Brazil P1</b>	<b>Brazil P2</b>	<b>Brazil P3</b>	<b>Brazil Trendline P1, P2, P3</b>	<b>U.S. P1</b>	<b>U.S. P2</b>	<b>U.S. P3</b>	<b>U.S. Trendline P1, P2, P3</b>
Employment Prospects	3.77	3.60	3.87	✓	3.47	2.91	3.07	✓
Career Skills Development	4.19	4.06	4.06	✓	3.79	3.62	3.79	✓
Professional Contacts	3.93	3.37	3.98	✓	3.52	3.31	4.05	✓
Int'l Career Perspective	3.97	3.50	3.60	✓	3.96	3.71	3.41	✓

*Note:* Teal highlighting denotes statistically significant differences between the Brazilian and U.S. cohorts at the corresponding programme phase (per Mann–Whitney *U* tests,  $p < .05$ ).

Overall, the U.S. student cohort expressed less certainty about the impact of the programme on their professional development as compared with the Brazilian student cohort. This is reflected in the interviews as well. Progressively declining scores along Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 are visible in only one area and only for U.S. students. This was in response to the question: “To what extent have you gained an international perspective in your chosen field as a result of this experience?” This was borne out in interview questions as well, wherein the Brazilian student cohort seemed more optimistic about international career impact than the U.S. cohort. Furthermore, Brazilian students consistently had higher scores in the area of professional development, with statistically higher scores across all three phases in eight out of twelve questions. Brazilian students also scored significantly higher in linguistic development

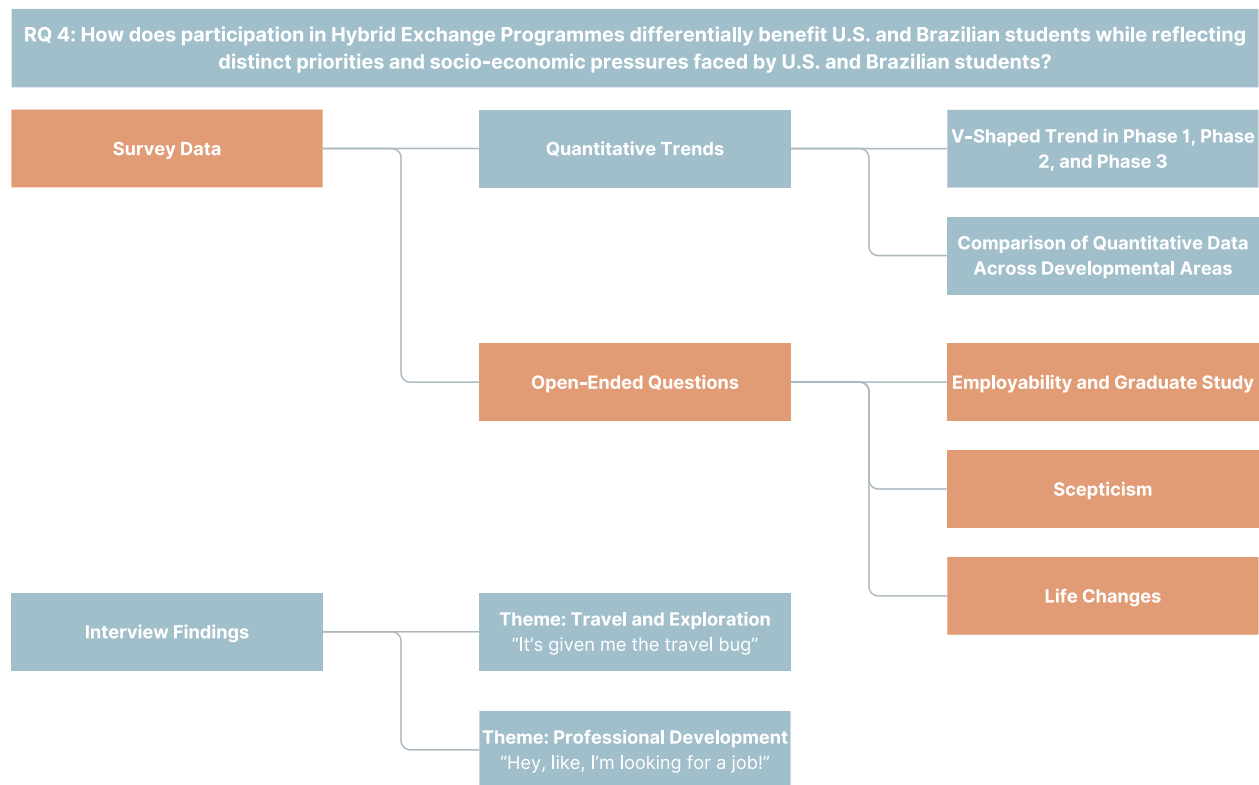
throughout the programme. This concept is explored further through the open-ended survey data in the next section.

**Open-Ended Survey Data to Support RQ 4**

In addition to quantitative data, open-ended survey data informed findings for RQ 4. Figure 42 provides a visual showing the sources of data that support this: student responses to questions about employability and graduate study, questions about the future, and general scepticism expressed by some students at different junctures in the programme.

**Figure 42**

*Survey Data Exploring Open-Ended Questions Related to RQ 4*



***Theme One: Employability and Graduate Study***

Open-ended survey questions provide deeper insight into how students perceived the programme as contributing to their professional development or suitability for graduate school.

One of the open-ended survey questions asked, “How do you think this experience will enhance your future employability or suitability for graduate school?” Table 26 summarises the topics mentioned in each phase and summarises the total, putting the topics in descending order starting with the most grounded.

**Table 26**

*Students’ Perceived Impact on Employability and Graduate Study*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Phase 1</b>	<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Phase 3</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Employability	12	11	12	35
Intercultural	12	12	5	29
International Work Experience	2	9	8	19
Academics	7	2	2	11
Communication	6	3	2	11
Teamwork	3	3	3	9
Business Experience	1	3	3	7
Scepticism	2	1	4	7
U.S. University on Résumé	3	2	1	6
Social Skills	3	1	2	6
Adaptability	3	1	1	5
Networking	1	3	0	4
Demonstrated language proficiency	2	1	1	4
Study Abroad	0	0	4	4
Future Travel	1	0	1	2
Global Awareness	0	0	1	1
Sustainability	0	0	1	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>234</b>

In comparing the responses of the U.S. and Brazilian students, a few noteworthy areas of difference emerge. Many Brazilian students described the importance of putting the experience of working with a U.S. university onto their résumé. As one Brazilian student put it, “The opportunity of working with a such good University abroad opens a lot of doors on the market” (BR21, 1:9 ¶ 7–8). The ability to demonstrate proficiency in English was another area that emerged from the Brazilian students’ responses. A commonly repeated sentiment comes from BR22, who writes, “Having such a programme in my curriculum makes it much appealing to international companies and universities as it states that I’m capable and willing to learn and experience new things, as well as show English proficiency” (BR22, 15:16 ¶ 7–8).

Overall, the three-phase survey offers insights into the students’ evolving perceptions and experiences throughout the programme. By following participants’ expectations, reflections, and perceived outcomes across virtual and in-person components, the survey provides a better understanding of students’ personal, intercultural, linguistic, and professional development. The use of Multiple Imputation ensured the inclusion of all participant data, preserving the integrity of individual voices. These findings help address the study’s research questions by highlighting key trends, such as the U.S. students’ intercultural growth, Brazilian students’ focus on professional development and language acquisition, and the role of virtual versus in-person interactions in shaping students’ overall experiences.

For Brazilian students, their participation in the programme resulted in acquiring new competencies and also gaining access to opportunities in an inequitable global marketplace that places value on foreign credentials and English-language competence. In contrast, U.S. students’ priorities reflect greater security within the employment systems. These diverse positionalities

point to the ways in which the outcomes of participating in such a programme reflect geopolitical and socio-economic disparities.

### *Theme Two: Scepticism*

The second theme noted in the open-ended survey responses was scepticism. A few students expressed scepticism about the potential for their participation to lead to enhanced employability or suitability for graduate school (Gr=8). Two of these students had seemed to indicate that the narrowness of the programme made it less useful for their specific trajectory. US47 writes, “It’s definitely an experience I can draw on or talk about, but I don’t believe employers will place much significance on it unless I’m applying to jobs in Brazil” (68:14 ¶ 7 – 8). This was one of the students with an ascender pattern—meaning that he started out with the lowest score in Phase 1, with a higher score in Phase 2 and the highest score in Phase 3. Similarly, in the Phase 3 surveys BR18 writes, “Yes and no. I believe it will help me if I choose to pursue a master’s or doctorate degree. However, as a psychology student aiming to work in clinical practice in Brazil, I don’t think this experience will significantly impact my employability.” While this student had the lowest score in Phase 2, her highest score was in Phase 1, potentially indicating that her overall goals were not met (16:19 ¶ 7 – 8). One student expressed scepticism throughout each of the three phases during which he answered this question, although over time he seemed to perceive slightly more value in terms of impact on career or future graduate study:

- Phase 1: I don’t think this experience will enhance my employability and suitability for graduate school (US29, 28:6 ¶ 7 – 8).
- Phase 2: I don’t think it will (US29, 47:15 ¶ 7 – 8).

- Phase 3: I don't think it really did but what it did do was open my eyes to the possibility of studying abroad and seeking out new opportunities and adventures (US29, 64:23 ¶ 7–8).

This student's average score for the three phases followed a check mark pattern, with the highest score in Phase 3, potentially indicating increased self-reported growth and overall satisfaction by the programme's end.

Another student started off with more of a sceptical approach to the programme's contribution to career preparation, but gradually seemed to see more value as the programme went on:

- Phase 1: I don't think it will greatly contribute in all honesty. Perhaps my exposure to different cultures in Brazil will allow me to bring a more diverse nuanced perspective to wherever I choose to work (US28 25:6 ¶ 7–8).
- Phase 2: I think it will make me more appealing as it shows I can work with people from other cultures (US28: 45:16 ¶ 7–8).
- Phase 3: I think it did, simply because this allows me to see a new perspective that future colleagues may be coming from, and it's an experience that I can speak about in the future US28, 62:12 ¶ 9–10).

As with US29, US28's score followed a check mark pattern with the highest score in Phase 3, potentially indicating increased self-reported growth and overall satisfaction.

The analysis of students' responses demonstrates a wide range of perceived impacts from the programme, with key themes such as employability, intercultural communication, and international work experience emerging as dominant. Many students saw the experience as a valuable addition to their résumés, particularly Brazilian students, who emphasised the

importance of collaborating with a U.S. university and demonstrating English proficiency to appeal to international job markets. In contrast, U.S. students more often highlighted the programme’s role in broadening perspectives, enhancing soft skills, and providing future networking opportunities.

***Theme Three: Life Changes***

The third theme noted in the open-ended survey questions was “Life Changes.” In the Phase 2 and Phase 3 surveys, students were prompted to answer this question:

Describe whether participating in the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil has influenced your approach to challenges and new opportunities in your daily life. Have you made changes as a result of your experiences during the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil? Have you taken on any new activities as a result of participating? If so, please describe.

A summary of the changes described is provided in Table 27. The total frequency of the category of change mentioned is listed in descending order. While most students had ideas about how to respond to this question, there are a few who did not. In Phase 2, three U.S. respondents wrote that they did not know or did not think they had experienced this. In Phase 3, all respondents had answers to this question.

**Table 27**

*Life Changes*

<b>Change Described</b>	<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Phase 3</b>
Keeping an open mind	4	10
A shift in perspective or outlook	1	11
An interest in learning more about other cultures	5	5
Adaptability to new situations	3	5

Enhanced ability to do teamwork	4	2
Better time management capabilities	5	1
Improved English skills	1	4
Taking action to get out of their comfort zone	2	2
More confidence	1	3
Improved communication	1	2
Taking on new projects	1	2
Exploring new careers	2	0
Listening to Brazilian music	1	1
Ability to stay safer in unfamiliar environments	0	1
Enhanced employability	1	0
Integrating kindness into interactions	0	1
Portuguese language study	0	1
Making sustainability a more common practice	0	1
Waking up earlier	0	1
Enrolling in a <i>capoeira</i> class	0	1

The responses reveal a variety of life changes among participants and emphasise both professional development and shifting perspectives. One Brazilian student reflected on her newfound desire to take on additional responsibilities. She writes:

It certainly made a difference and shook up my routine a lot (but it was worth every second), I needed to manage my time well to be able to participate in the meetings and still carry out all my daily activities efficiently... But it was all worth it, because it had a great impact on my development during my internship. Participating in this integration, I am increasingly taking on new projects and responsibilities, which makes me very happy.

(BR27, 18:6 ¶ 12)

Her reflection shows how she responded to the ways in which participating in the programme challenged her to manage her time effectively while also trying new things.

Another student described how her participation in the programme led her to take on a wide variety of new activities related to both professional work and cultural connection:

Participating in the virtual exchange and in-person experience in Brazil has significantly influenced my approach to challenges and new opportunities in my daily life. The experience taught me to embrace diverse perspectives and think creatively when solving problems. I now approach challenges with more open-mindedness and adaptability. As a result of this experience, I have made several changes in my daily routine. I have become more proactive in seeking out collaborative projects and have joined a local social business group to continue learning and contributing to impactful initiatives.

Additionally, I have started practicing capoeira, which has helped me stay connected to the cultural experiences I enjoyed in Brazil. These activities have enriched my life and continue to inspire me to pursue new opportunities with confidence and enthusiasm.

(BR25, 20:6 ¶ 12)

For some students, the experience also sparked a shift in interpersonal behaviour and increased their confidence in engaging with people from other countries:

I believe that the face-to-face part of the programme had the greatest impact on me. I discovered potential that I didn't know I had related to my interpersonal and communication skills. I learned more about myself and my own tastes and confirmed how much I enjoy being around people and learning new things. Because of this, I hope to be able to participate in more activities with exchange students at my work, something I avoided prior to the programme. (BR11, 21:6 ¶ 12)

While some students described specific changes like joining a social club or interacting with exchange students, others described changes related to their overall demeanour and the ways in which they interacted more generally. One U.S. student reflected:

I would say I definitely am less judgemental of others. Prior to the trip, I had never really seen a different way of life other than U.S. social norms but after visiting Brazil, I realized we (Americans) are not the only people on this earth, and everyone has different cultural norms. As a result, I am much less likely to jump to judgement. (US36, 65:11 ¶ 26)

Another described how she was implementing changes to her professional demeanour:

I think working with the Brazilian students has made me reevaluate my connections to those I have when it comes to working in groups. I saw how they wanted to connect more emotionally, even leading us to making a group [music] playlist, and I now want to improve this part of myself to be more willing to open up as a friend and not just a coworker. (US48, 54:8 ¶ 18)

Students' responses to this question revealed a diverse range of perceived impacts on their daily lives, with changes unfolding in both subtle and significant ways. These responses reflect students' perceptions of the programme's influence across multiple dimensions.

The open-ended survey questions explored in this section focused on the differing ways that Brazilian and U.S. students experienced the programme's impact and how they expected it to shape their futures. Students identified several areas of value, including employability, intercultural competence, and prior international work experience. Brazilian students, in particular, emphasised the importance of listing the collaboration with a U.S. university on their résumés, with six references to this benefit coming from Brazilian participants. Some students,

mainly from the U.S., expressed scepticism about the programme's relevance to their career goals. However, this scepticism lessened over the course of the programme, with students who had initially expressed scepticism gradually being able to see how the programme was valuable for them.

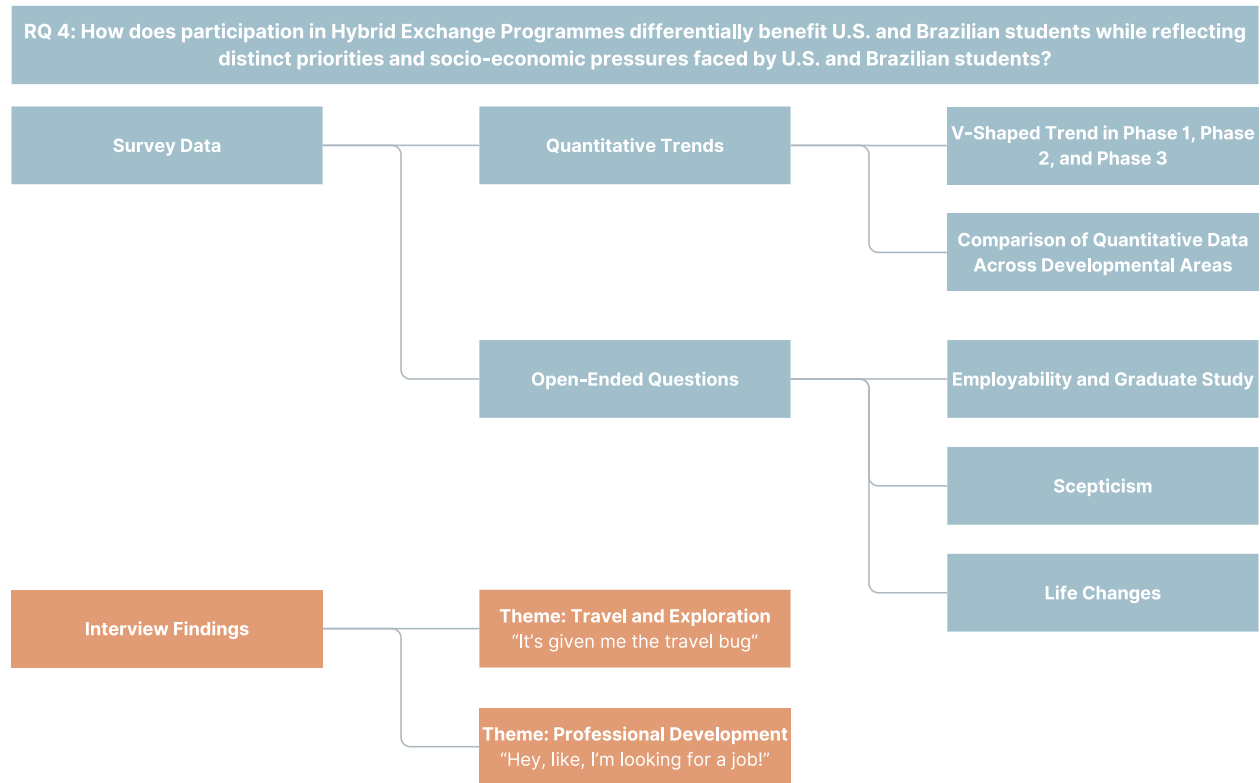
This question asked students to reflect on how participating in the programme impacted them in ways that extend beyond the formal curriculum. While not every student was able to find an answer to this in Phase 2, by Phase 3 all students were able to answer, again, indicating the role of the full programme in providing opportunities for student development. Through the changes they described, students demonstrated an ability to move outside of their comfort zone by taking on responsibilities or engaging with new people and practices with a greater level of openness. The examples the students provided also showed the ways in which the programme impacted not only their academic and professional life, but their personal lives as well. The findings reveal how participating in the Hybrid Exchange Programme prompted reflection and led to new perspectives that shaped the trajectory of their lives outside the programme as well.

#### **Interview Findings to Support RQ 4**

Interview findings in two key areas provide another layer of depth to understanding RQ 4. Figure 43 shows where the interview data fits into the overall data related to this research question. Among the seven themes that emerged in the interview coding process, two support RQ 4: Travel and Exploration, represented by the in vivo code "It's given me the travel bug" and Professional Development, represented by the in vivo code "Hey, like I'm looking for a job!"

**Figure 43**

*Interview Findings Related to RQ 4*



***Theme One: Travel and Exploration: “It’s Given Me the Travel Bug”***

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the U.S. students are more likely to have interview transcripts related to travel (Gr=105 vs Gr=42), as represented in Figure 44. This provides numeric visual representations of the number of occurrences of this code across Brazilian and U.S. transcripts.

**Figure 44**

*Interview Themes Related to Travel and Exploration*

Theme	Categories		
Travel and Exploration: “It’s given me the travel bug”	Travel and Exploration: “It’s given me the travel bug”	42	105
		Brazilian Occurrences	US Occurrence

As a whole, students had a wide range of different travel experiences prior to this programme. Some students expressed both sentiments, for instance a few of the U.S. students saying that they had travelled internationally as a young child but could no longer remember it well. Even among the students who had travelled more frequently, the U.S. students understood their participation in this particular programme to be immersive on a different level:

One of the kind of the goals that I had was to really, like, test out and see if, like, I want to maybe study abroad in the future, or even just live somewhere else in the future, because I've had, I have, like, family friends who lived in, like, Costa Rica for a couple of years, and talk all about it, and they loved it. And I was like, oh, that sounds really interesting. How like, much of a culture shock would that be, or how would it be to, like, learn a new language? And I really think this really helps me, like, kind of push me more towards wanting to study abroad and kind of get that experience. Another goal I honestly had for myself was kind of just step outside my comfort zone. (US08, 18:115 ¶90)

Another U.S. student with significant prior travel experience contrasted those experiences to his participation in this programme, which offered more opportunities to make connections locally:

We've gone to around five continents before, but we don't really get like, immersed in different cultures. I would say we kind of go to like, the touristy areas, I guess. And I really thought this was a unique opportunity, working with Brazilian students, to kind of get like in, like their side of like, living with them. Because every time I've gone out of the country, I haven't interacted with anyone outside of the country, it's kind of been all touristy locations or people who speak English, and it was really fascinating seeing the opportunity to like talk with different people and actually like learn about what goes on in

these cultures. And you can read and watch different cultures on the news, but you can't really, like, it's so different when you're actually there. (US09, 18:110 ¶ 54)

While he had previously travelled extensively, those experiences he framed as more surface-level encounters. In reflecting on this programme, the student recognised how meaningful it was to move beyond observation and actually interact with local peers—to “learn about what goes on in these cultures” by being embedded in them. The in-person collaboration with Brazilian students served not only as a new concrete experience but also reshaped how the student made sense of prior travel. Through this process, the programme prompted deeper reflection, allowing them to reconstruct their understanding of what global engagement looks like.

The idea that the travel experience had expanded students' horizons came up frequently among all students. One reflected:

You know, the world just seems a lot bigger now that, now that I've been there, and I would like to explore that. You know, before I was just—I kind of just wanted to live in the United States, you know, work in the United States, study in the United States.

(US16, 19:23 ¶ 239)

Five of the U.S. students, including US16, expressed an interest in returning to Brazil, either for a semester abroad or to pursue graduate studies. Similarly, three Brazilian students expressed interest in attending the U.S. students' university for an exchange programme or graduate study. One Brazilian student shared: “I would like to do a PhD abroad, but my options were mostly located in Europe. But now I am heavily considering [the U.S. university] as well.” (BR04 ¶ 120). While exploring a new country was valuable, the intercultural connections students formed allowed them to envision themselves succeeding in other intercultural environments.

The travel experiences described by both U.S. and Brazilian students underscore the differential benefits of the programme, with U.S. students often highlighting its transformative role in moving beyond surface-level tourism to a more immersive cultural exchange. Brazilian students, on the other hand, valued the intercultural connections and the opportunities to envision academic and professional possibilities abroad.

***Theme Two: Professional Development: “Hey, Like I’m Looking for a Job!”***

A prominent theme from the interview data, “Professional Development,” represented by the in vivo code “Hey, like I’m looking for a job!” had a groundedness of 116 (see Figure 45). It emerged as a significant theme in the participants’ reflections, especially among the Brazilian students (61 times vs. 55 for U.S. students), with a smaller overall pool of interviewees (9 Brazilian students vs. 16 U.S. students).

**Figure 45**

*Interview Themes Related to Professional Development*

Theme	Categories		
Professional Development	Professional Development “hey, like I’m looking for a job!”	61	55
		Brazilian Occurrences	US Occurrences

Many students recognised the value of the programme not only for gaining intercultural knowledge but also for building practical skills, such as networking, intercultural communication, and language proficiency. The student surveys indicate that the Brazilian students saw greater value in the professional development opportunities that this programme offered, through language skills enhancement, intercultural communication practice, and potentially through networking as part of the business case and the company visits in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

For some students, these experiences provided direct opportunities to connect with professionals in their fields. As one Brazilian participant emphasised, the programme facilitated their ability to meet with professionals and network:

I think that the network connections that I built—not only with the students from the U.S., like professors, but also from the companies that we got a chance to visit here in Brazil...like those are two companies that I have always wanted to know a little bit deeper. Also trying to apply for jobs. Or even study how the company works. And I got a chance to do it. So, I got their connections. I got phone numbers. I got their emails, and I have a more direct approach if I want to try something like in the future. (BR09, 8:83 ¶ 240)

Six students (four U.S. and two Brazilian) described a desire to work overseas in the future. But for the Brazilian students, knowledge of English was an essential skill even if they wanted to work domestically. As one Brazilian student put it, “So, almost every job needs an at least intermediate English,” a sentiment that was reiterated by each of the Brazilian students during their interviews.

Exposure to a wide variety of industries was helpful for many students. Some of the Brazilian students had fields of study that were adjacent to business rather than having business as their primary focus, and yet they described the knowledge they gleaned to be useful to them in their own professional development. One student reflects on how the experience inspired him to consider different career trajectories:

I would say every visit that we did throughout the companies has helped me a lot in the way that I even think about my own projects, if that makes sense, with sustainability, and how do I want what companies would I want to go? And like my professional careers

also? What am I looking for when I'm searching for jobs? Or even when I'm changing jobs and my career, as well? But it was also pretty good to, like, get out of my comfort zone and just, you know, get—get headfirst into something that, you know, I wasn't comfortable with. (2:40 ¶ 77 in BR02)

For some participants, the experience reinforced their interest in working internationally, while others gained clarity on what they wanted from their careers. The Brazilian students in particular were able to benefit from networking opportunities and the ability to hone their English skills, which is essential in their ability to access career opportunities. U.S. students found the experience broadened their perspectives and highlighted new international opportunities, although they were less likely to make a direct connection between the programme and the professional development experience gained.

#### **Summary of Findings for RQ 4**

This section explored how participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes differentially benefits U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by U.S. and Brazilian students. It drew on several sources including qualitative and quantitative survey data and interview findings. Brazilian students consistently reported higher gains in professional development and language skills, suggesting a strong alignment between the programme's offerings and their professional and linguistic goals. This contrasts with U.S. students, who predominantly benefited in terms of personal and intercultural development, including maturity, self-confidence, and worldview expansion. These trends may indicate that Brazilian students entered the programme with higher expectations or specific professional aspirations, while U.S. students saw the exchange as a way to foster interpersonal and cross-cultural growth. Both groups described the importance of moving outside their comfort

zones, in line with transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), where transformative learning is prompted by disorienting dilemmas.

Critical Internationalisation (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; De Wit & Jones, 2022; George Mwangi et al., 2018; Raby, 2023; Stein, 2021) highlight how socio-economic factors shape the benefits of this programme, with Brazilian students utilising it to enhance employability and English skills and U.S. students viewing the experience as supplementary rather than essential. This positionality was shaped by intersecting privileges: overall, the U.S. students had less pressure to acquire additional language skills, and they were able to view participation as cultural exposure rather than career preparation. The programme thus became a space for exploration rather than a targeted investment in future employability.



## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This exploratory study on Hybrid Exchange Programmes describes an emerging form of global education programming that combines virtual exchange (VE) and in-person exchange. It explores this topic from multiple angles and through a variety of lenses. This dissertation follows the trajectory of student growth and development over the course of the programme, explores the challenges of participation, describes the connections that students created, and compares the priorities and outcomes for Brazilian and U.S. students. The VE dimension played a role in laying the groundwork for student development in all five areas of development measured, but the in-person dimension played an important role in solidifying this growth. This discussion section explores the ways in which findings intersect with literature and the theories as they relate to experiential learning, belonging, Critical Internationalisation, and Critical Virtual Exchange. The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. to describe how students' perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolve over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme
2. to understand the challenges that students may encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context
3. to examine how the structure of the programme, together with students' active participation, shaped their experiences of connection and belonging.
4. to illuminate the ways in which participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes may differentially benefit U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by U.S. and Brazilian students.

The discussion chapter brings the findings into conversation with relevant literature and theories.

### Themes

This chapter discusses the key themes that emerged from the research and considers their significance in light of current debates in international education. These themes illuminate how Hybrid Exchange Programmes (HEP) disrupt assumptions about what constitutes meaningful global learning and the modalities through which it is delivered. I frame each theme as a “disruption”:

- The first disruption, “The Mobility Disruption,” relates to a rethinking of the mobility paradigm. It explores how HEPs integrate virtual and physical elements and in so doing, challenge the dominance of long-term physical travel as a primary driver of intercultural learning.
- The second disruption, “The Design Disruption,” underscores the role of VE as a flexible and responsive pedagogy. By incorporating hybrid forms of communication that mirror students’ everyday digital practices, the programme design itself becomes a key mechanism for fostering iterative and reflective learning.
- The third disruption, “The Equity Disruption,” explores how HEPs can pursue equitable internationalisation by expanding access, but also recognises that such programmes can reproduce structural inequities if not designed with attention to power dynamics and reciprocity.

These themes offer new insights into both the potential and the limitations of Hybrid Exchange Programmes as a pathway toward deeper and more inclusive global learning.

#### **The Mobility Disruption: Challenging the Dominance of Long-Term Mobility**

The first theme discusses how Hybrid Exchange Programmes provide an alternative to mobility-centric models of International Higher Education by combining VE with in-person

engagement that, for Brazilian students, takes place domestically. It describes the ways in which the HEP model pushed students out of their comfort zones to encourage learning both in person and in virtual settings. It describes how the blended modality enhanced students' senses of connection and belonging.

The findings from this research contribute to a body of scholarship that intentionally delineates internationalisation from physical travel (De Wit, 2020; Helm & Guth, 2022). In decoupling internationalisation from physical mobility, other global learning opportunities open up to offer pathways for engagement that align with the strengths, resources, and circumstances of a wider variety of students who may not otherwise travel (Aldrich & Whatley, 2024). This is particularly apparent in the current era, which has been marked by a global pandemic, armed conflicts, rising nationalism, and growing restrictions on visa issuance (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Whatley, 2025), which further underscores the relevance of HEPs as a more reliable offering in an era of instability. Mobility is not needed to create the conditions for transformative global learning, as described in the next subsection.

### **Transformative Learning Outside the Comfort Zone**

This subsection develops the idea of “The Mobility Disruption,” by exploring how transformative learning did not depend on immersion, but rather, that stepping outside of one's comfort zone was an essential part of the learning process, both with and without travel. Stepping outside the comfort zone through the VE pedagogy caused some level of discomfort for the students. In this study, discomfort experienced in the VE, whether related to language, communication modality, or travel, prompted reflection and, in some cases, shifts, in students' perspectives and actions. Brazilian students described stepping out of their comfort zone more frequently in the VE, which was a key finding as it shows how educators can move beyond

equating transformational international education with in-person experiences. This builds on Mezirow's (1995) concept of the disorienting dilemma as well as recent work on stretch interventions, which are new challenges that push people outside their comfort zones (Russo-Netzer & Cohen, 2023). The study also showcases how discomfort, when scaffolded, reflected upon, and supported, can enable students to successfully navigate new challenges and develop a sense of trust in their own abilities. The refocus on pedagogy also builds on Freire (1970) who understands learning as taking place through conflict, contradiction, and struggle. While these forms of discomfort bring about learning, change, and growth, they may also enhance students' desire to create belonging and find ways of bonding with those who are going through similar challenges. This will be explored further in the next section on connection and belonging.

### **Blending Modalities to Enhance Intercultural Connections and Belonging**

This subsection extends the theme of "The Mobility Disruption," by illustrating how virtual and in-person modalities worked together to foster belonging. Intentional programme design can create opportunities for students to connect and feel that they belong. Yao (2015) writes that belonging is both a fundamental human need and a significant factor in students' persistence. Yet simply placing students in the same space will not necessarily lead to meaningful engagement or connection. It can sometimes be challenging for students in exchange programmes to find common ground, but certain design interventions can help in overcoming some of those barriers, as will be discussed in the next section "The Design Disruption."

The experience of having the students together face-to-face was essential in creating belonging and connection. Findings from this research reinforce the idea that in-person exchanges are valuable opportunities for students to develop new skill sets, step out of their comfort zone, and get to know their exchange partners. That said, the experiences were different

for the U.S. students, for whom the experience involved international travel, and the Brazilian students, for whom this experience involved domestic travel and is better described as “Internationalisation at Home” as they did not cross international borders (Leask, 2009). Being in Brazil gave the U.S. students the experience of being non-native language speakers, which was something the Brazilian students had experienced during the VE. In person, the Brazilian students experienced their own country through new eyes, sometimes engaging in local cultural activities for the first time, such as visiting the Aqueducts (*Arcos da Lapa*) in Rio de Janeiro or practising *capoeira*. Although students came from different parts of Brazil and some were experiencing São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro for the first time, this was impactful even for the local students. Student reflections on these experiences underscore how the blended modality offered complementary forms of engagement: the VE component helped lay the groundwork for connection and language empathy, while the in-person phase deepened those connections through shared, embodied experiences. These modalities expanded the pathways through which students could form intercultural connections and experience a sense of belonging.

Hybrid Exchange Programmes can disrupt the traditional mobility paradigm by reimagining the role that travel plays in students’ global learning journeys. They offer a unified, scaffolded learning experience wherein students move from challenge to reflection to experimentation both online and in person, following Kolb (1984). Students also encountered disorienting dilemmas that led to shifts in their perspectives (Mezirow, 1995). These transformative experiences did not always rely on travel, nor did they require extended in-person immersion. This study challenges ideas about programmatic elements that yield significant learning outcomes and offer a more flexible and equitable pathway for global learning.

### **The Design Disruption: Elevating Programme Design as Central to Student Learning**

Whereas “The Mobility Disruption” examines the *what* of international education and challenges the reliance on physical mobility, “The Design Disruption” turns attention to the *how*. It highlights how carefully sequenced programme design, rather than travel itself, becomes the central catalyst for learning. This section explores how the VE functions as a responsive pedagogy that meets student needs within the programme studied. I explore how virtual and hybrid communication reflects students’ everyday modes of communicating with each other. I then describe how the programme design supported iterative and reflective learning. Finally, I discuss how findings from this study reinforce the conceptualisation of VE as a Thirdspace” (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021; Leask, 2009; Orsini-Jones et al., 2025; Sicka & Atajanova, 2024; Wimpenny et al., 2022) or a learning environment that offers unique forms of interaction and insight not typically accessible in traditional face-to-face exchanges.

### **Hybrid as a Reflection of Student Communication Practices**

This subsection supports the theme of “The Design Disruption,” by demonstrating how the Hybrid Exchange model reflects the realities of digitally mediated intercultural communication. Rather than existing as an alternative to mobility, VE aligns with how students naturally develop cross-cultural relationships in a world in which communication is already increasingly hybrid. Researchers have pointed out how virtual has had to “prove itself” in contrast to physical mobility where uncritical assumptions continue to exist about the potential benefits (Helm & Guth, 2022). Within this study, the use of virtual tools in international higher education reflects a purposeful action to show how intercultural communication frequently occurs, that is, both face-to-face and also mediated by technology. In this study, the lines between virtual and physical exchange are increasingly blurred, with students choosing to

connect with each other virtually, even when not required to do so, through various social media and messaging platforms. This shows how in-person and virtual interactions are increasingly natural and complementary parts of the learning experience, particularly among Gen Z students. The Hybrid Exchange Programme reflects how students communicate and as such, changes the classroom experience in a responsive way.

### **Scaffolded Learning Design to Support Iterative and Reflective Learning**

The theme of “The Design Disruption” challenges the idea that meaningful exchange requires physical travel for extended distances or durations, thus moving away from a “more is better” mentality (e.g., Coker et al., 2018; Dwyer, 2004; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2009). It is further illustrated by examining the ways in which intentional sequencing and scaffolding within programme design supports iterative cycles of reflection, adaptation, and deepened engagement. The HEP model supports O’Dowd’s (2021) call for greater institutional integration of VE as a central form of global learning. This study, however, expands upon O’Dowd (2021) by demonstrating that the sequence of programme design matters, as does the scaffolding of learning experiences. Following Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, the Hybrid Exchange Programmes allowed students to move through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation, with the VE serving as the initial catalyst and allowing students to continue reflecting through the course of the full programme. This iterative progression underscores the importance of sequencing the experiences and also intentionally structuring them to build on one another in ways that deepen learning and enhance intercultural engagement. It suggests that the virtual and in-person exchanges might be better understood as overlapping layers rather than discrete moments.

One of the ways in which the virtual dimension of this programme added value to the overall experience was through its use as a scaffold for students who had a wide range of prior intercultural and linguistic preparation for the programme. Just as Kolb (2015) describes the educator “tailoring” the learning process to students’ needs, the programme design of the Hybrid Exchange Programmes allowed for students to continue building on their knowledge throughout the programme while relying on reflection as a way to make sense of the changes they were experiencing. The students in this programme had not yet met the goals that they anticipated reaching at the end of the VE, yet their participation played an important role in preparing them for the in-person dimension of the programme. Echoing prior research on virtual global teamwork, students’ critical survey responses after the VE could be interpreted as “a rise in consciousness concerning the difficulties of real interaction with other cultures” (Swartz et al., 2020, p. 74). Rather than being an indication of failure or a limitation, this discomfort can be interpreted as a productive form of tension, one that prompts deeper reflection, challenges assumptions, and motivates students to remain engaged in the subsequent in-person component.

In this study, the timing of the VE allowed students to get to know each other more gradually before meeting onsite. Findings support previous research that shows how important the preparatory phase is for international students in developing a sense of belonging and optimising learning (Batardière et al., 2019; Cappellini & Macre, 2020; Griggio & Pittarello, 2022; Schoe et al., 2022). Hybrid Exchange Programmes, which include VE prior to meeting face-to-face, can play a significant role in creating connections and reducing barriers to engagement.

The VE served to create common ground for the students in this study and enabled them to build rapport and get to know each other. Through assignments and class discussions, these

connections helped bridge the students' diverse cultural backgrounds as well as differences in socio-economic status, language, and even personality. This research shows that intentionally creating opportunities for interaction before the in-person exchange made it possible to reduce cliques organised by country of origin or socio-economic status, and to remove barriers to cross-cultural engagement. The blended format allows not only for students to make these attempts in multiple formats—in person and online—but also at multiple junctures throughout the programme, which in turn increases the likelihood that stakeholders involved in these international programmes will meet the goals they set at the outset.

Part of the value of the VE lies in its ability to meet a wide range of student needs and programmatic goals. It can serve as an introduction into the cultural learning process, or it can add depth to in-person exchange. It emerges as an adaptable framework for global learning, one that is capable of scaffolding learning, offering opportunities for reflection, and expanding access to intercultural learning opportunities.

### **The Thirdspace Potential of Virtual Exchange: Negotiating Identity and Belonging**

The theme of “The Design Disruption” is further advanced by exploring the concept of “thirdspaces” (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021; Leask, 2009; Orsini-Jones et al., 2025; Sicka & Atajanova, 2024; Wimpenny et al., 2022) and discussing the ways in which connection and belonging emerged from the programme's design. This study builds on Leask (2009), who defines thirdspace as “a meeting place between different cultures where there is recognition of the manifestation of cultural difference and where equal and meaningful reconstructive cross-cultural dialogue can occur.” (Leask, 2009, p. 217). In this study, the VE provided not only a forum for structured collaboration, but also a space where students could negotiate identity, explore cultural difference, and form relationships that extended beyond programme. These

interactions reflected a genuine desire to connect across boundaries and to create new spaces of belonging, and the VE provided a space for that.

For some students, especially those who were initially more reserved, the virtual environment offered unexpected forms of social support. It also enabled Brazilian students to connect with peers in new ways, forming relationships they may not have pursued in other educational settings. In this sense, VE functioned as a “third space” (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021; Leask, 2009; Sicka & Atajanova, 2024; Wimpenny et al., 2022). From a Critical Internationalisation perspective, thirdspace dynamics are significant not only because they support identity development and belonging, but because they reflect student agency in co-constructing intercultural learning. Such places can provide sites of refuge for interpreting new and challenging information and situations. The thirdspace conceptualisation illustrates how Hybrid Exchange Programmes can expand the range of internationalisation opportunities available to students and educators. These programmes function not only as platforms for intercultural contact, but also as spaces where students exercise agency, cultivate belonging, and co-create meaningful intercultural learning experiences. Significantly, the thirdspace conceptualisation challenges assumptions about where and how global learning takes place and elevates the VE as a distinctive venue that offers unique affordances for student connection that are not always available face to face. It positions the VE not as a lesser alternative, but as a modality that offers something the in-person exchange cannot.

### **The Equity Disruption: Questioning Ties between Access and Equity**

The third theme, “The Equity Disruption,” explores how Hybrid Exchange Programmes can expand access in pursuit of more equitable internationalisation. At the same time, however, the findings show that such programmes can also reproduce structural inequities if they are not designed with explicit attention to power, language, and reciprocity. This theme relies on Critical Internationalisation (Cai & Leask, 2024; Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; da Silva et al., 2023; De Wit & Jones, 2022; Freire, 1970; Jordão & Mandarinino Silva, 2023; Martinez et al., 2023; Mittelmeier, 2024; Stein, 2021; Yao, 2015) and Critical Virtual Exchange (Helm, 2024; Hinck et al., 2024; O’Dowd, 2023b; Sicka & Atajanova, 2024; Whatley et al., 2022) as theoretical frameworks that elucidate the wide-ranging ways in which Hybrid Exchange Programmes offer differing benefits to students. As this research has shown, when considering the ways in which socio-economic pressures influenced the exchange, there are particular differences evident in the way the programmes were experienced by the Brazilian and U.S. students. The following subsections examine how Hybrid Exchange Programmes can simultaneously expand access and also risk reinforcing inequalities depending on how they are designed and implemented. I begin by examining differences between the Brazilian and U.S. student cohorts, then explore mobility asymmetries, and finally discuss the broader tensions between access and equity in Hybrid Exchange Programmes.

### **Reimagining Global South-North Relationships in Hybrid Exchange Programmes**

This subsection contributes to the theme of “The Equity Disruption” by questioning ties between access and equity, by exploring how differing goals, mobility asymmetries, and language choice shaped the experience of Brazilian and U.S. students. First, significant differences appeared in the goals that American and Brazilian students set for participating in the

programme, and in the self-reported learning that took place. Brazilian students emphasised the importance of collaborating with a U.S. university and demonstrating English proficiency to enhance their employability. In contrast, U.S. students more often highlighted the programme's role in broadening perspectives, enhancing soft skills, and providing future networking opportunities. These findings align with Borges (2022) who describes the need for Brazilian students to rely on extracurricular opportunities to augment their language skills. At the same time, utilising English as the predominant language for VE also risks reinforcing “colonial linguistic hierarchies (Aldrich & Whatley, 2024, p. 62) and can reproduce inequalities among students (Hashim & Finardi, 2024; Helm, 2024). As a result of the legacy of the Science without Borders programme, the U.S. is the largest recipient of Brazilian students ( $N = 16,877$ ) (IIE Open Doors, 2024). In comparison, while 280,716 U.S. students studied abroad in the 2022–2023 academic year, 1,547 studied in Brazil (Institute of International Education, 2024), meaning that less than one per cent of the total study abroad students from the U.S. study in Brazil. In addition to this imbalance, research on international students is largely focused on “South-to-North” migration with a dearth of English language publications on destinations like Brazil (Mittelmeier et al., 2024).

The Hybrid Exchange Programme described in this study does not align neatly with traditional models of mobility flows. The programme was developed by a study abroad practitioner in Brazil. It was team-taught by faculty from both the U.S. and Brazil, with Brazilian faculty taking the lead. The exchange is conducted in English and requires students to work as consultants for a Brazilian client. It concludes with the in-person component held in Brazil. This Hybrid Exchange Programme represents a meaningful path towards changing the entrenched centrality of Global North institutions and presents an opportunity to reconfigure international

partnerships in ways that are more reciprocal. In so doing, this VE pushes against the dominant movement of students from the Global South to Global North. At the same time, conducting the programme in English positioned the Brazilian students and faculty in a role that required them to accommodate U.S. norms.

Helm and Guth (2022) provide a critical lens to understand the ways in which inequality can pervade even “bottom-up, bi, or multilateral projects,” (p. 275) and caution that it is possible that:

The knowledge that is made relevant and the terms under which the exchanges are set out and implemented will be influenced by factors such as the partners’ academic positions and power, their experience of VE, linguistic competence, access to and experience of using technology, institutional constraints, as well as sociohistoric relations (Helm & Guth, 2022, p. 275).

This underscores the need to critically assess not only who initiates and leads such programmes, but also how power, knowledge, and institutional legacies shape the possibilities for truly equitable South-North collaborations.

### **Balancing Access with Critical Equity Practices**

This subsection expands on the “The Equity Disruption” theme by highlighting the ways in which access alone can reinforce inequities unless programmes are designed around reciprocity, equity, and reflection. The concept of “relationships of reciprocity” (Hebert & Abdi, 2013; Vavrus & Pekol, 2015) provide a useful lens for examining the tensions that arise when building partnerships across contexts marked by unequal access to resources, linguistic dominance, and other structural disparities. As structural inequalities between the Global South and Global North make equity difficult to achieve, programme designers face challenges when

working toward more ethical and reciprocal models of engagement. Doing so represents a shift away from a competitive, stratified, and neoliberal model of global education and toward a framework that focuses on mutual recognition and benefit and deeper intercultural exchange. Elements of reciprocal design were also present—particularly in the collaborative construction of the VE and the shared pedagogical planning between Brazilian and U.S. faculty. The programme in this study was co-developed across both Brazilian and U.S. contexts. This co-construction process created room for a more horizontal exchange of ideas and priorities. In this shift, equity is never fully achieved but is seen as a continuous drive toward practices that are ethical and beneficial to all stakeholders.

Hybrid Exchange Programmes remain a promising direction for addressing these issues. Aldrich and Whatley (2023) argue that traditional study abroad is limited in its scalability because of a raft of financial and logistical constraints. Hybrid approaches present a compelling alternative, but the findings from this study and others have shown that efficacy rests on careful programme design. The aggregate reach may be broader due to the accessibility and scalability of Hybrid Exchange Programmes, but the extent to which individuals can benefit is impacted by factors such as digital access, scheduling availability, language choice, and institutional support. Recognising these potential shortcomings is not meant to invalidate the promise that Hybrid Exchange Programmes offer, but rather to underscore the need for careful planning and attentiveness to structural asymmetries. In this context, access matters, but equally important is the ability of such programmes to move students toward their participation objectives. In this context, scalability and equity should not be treated as separate aims but as goals that should be addressed simultaneously, through thoughtful, context-specific programme design.

Increasing access without criticality can reinforce rather than disrupt power asymmetries between the countries involved (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; George Mwangi et al., 2018; Stein, 2021; Vavrus & Pekol, 2015). Using English as lingua franca and prioritising Western academic norms can marginalise other forms of knowledge and could potentially lead Hybrid Exchange Programmes to replicate existing hierarchies even as they endeavour to transcend them. Thus, any expansion into such programmes must be led by questions about whose voices are heard and amplified, whose knowledge is legitimised, and whose goals shape the terms of the encounter.

What does this look like in practice? On both sides of the exchange, it requires attention to issues of digital access, language barriers, and scheduling constraints. The goal is to create the conditions for students to engage equitably rather than to advantage the students for whom these constraints are not barriers. Doing so requires tailoring support so that all students start from a solid foundation of engagement. It requires an understanding of the goals that both individual and institutional stakeholders (students, programme designers, faculty) have at the outset so that the potential benefits of participation are clear and stakeholders can make the right decision for their needs. Equity, in this context, requires structured opportunities for reflection at multiple junctures for students to re-evaluate previously taken-for-granted assumptions and to connect their learning back to their own contexts.

Designing Hybrid Exchange Programmes that are truly equitable requires attentiveness to the ways in which Western epistemologies can become the default and in turn, crowd out other ways of knowing and framing problems in ways that may not resonate with Global South participants (Helm, 2024). Programmes should also be co-created with participants from both sides of the exchange. This includes everything from the logistics of which Learning Management System to use to the learning objectives for the programme. It can also mean

rethinking how the success of the programme is defined and measured. As in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1995), it requires moving beyond exposure as the end-goal and toward learning that is shaped by opportunities to grapple with difference and revisit previously held assumptions. Programmes that treat interaction as the end goal risk reproducing stereotypes and limiting opportunities for deeper knowledge. They risk creating global experiences that are at best superficial and performative, and at worst damaging, rather than living up to their potential to be truly transformative.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study challenges the long-standing assumption in global education that longer-duration travel is inherently linked to deeper learning, while also offering a counterpoint to the dominant mobility flows from the Global South to the Global North. This research finds that deep learning emerges not from extensive, immersive international travel, but from the willingness of participants to engage with discomfort. Across all phases of the programme, transformative learning took place when students adapted to the challenges they faced, whether linguistic, project-based, or intercultural. These challenges prompted self-growth, and the organisation of the programme provided space for reflection, adaptation, and growth. The in-person exchange, while part of the mobility experience for some students, was less consequential in and of itself than the structured opportunities for students to move out of their comfort zone. These moments of transformation were not dependent on prolonged travel or extended in-person immersion. Instead, the hybrid structure created accessible pathways for students to engage in global learning. In doing so, it challenges the “longer is better” logic of traditional mobility and presents a flexible, equitable, and transformative alternative in which the integration of virtual and physical pedagogies yields greater impact than either model could achieve independently.

Hybrid Exchange Programmes are a promising alternative to the status quo and enable access without losing critical opportunities for students to engage in meaningful opportunities for growth.



## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation research began in 2020 when many practitioners within International Higher Education were embracing Virtual Internationalisation tools for the first time. What started as an enquiry into virtual tools that were popularised out of necessity during the pandemic shifted into an exploration of the enduring value that Virtual Internationalisation has, both in its own right and as a tool that can adapt to travel limitations brought about by geopolitical strife, pandemics, and other barriers to mobility. I briefly reflect on the research questions and findings that emerged from this study and conclude with directions for future research.

My first research question asked how students' perceptions of their personal, intercultural, linguistic, academic, and professional growth evolved over the different phases of the Hybrid Exchange Programme. Through surveys, interviews, and observations, it became evident that students' perceptions of their growth evolved over the course of the programme, and were not fully realised after the VE, but continued to grow over the entirety of the programme. In most cases, growth surpassed their initial expectations by the programme's conclusion. This finding is significant because it demonstrates that meaningful global learning outcomes are not confined to immersive travel alone but can be scaffolded and deepened through thoughtfully sequenced hybrid programming that blends virtual and in-person experiences. The VE offered a more gradual introduction into a new social setting, and the cultural preparation made the students feel more confident. In line with Mezirow's "disorienting dilemma," the experience pushed students out of their comfort zone while simultaneously motivating them to connect with other students and create new spaces of belonging.

My second research question explored the challenges that students encounter when engaging in technologically mediated communication in a cross-cultural context. Survey and

interview data were utilised to explore this question and showed that the VE proved to be the most challenging part of the programme; however, it served as an essential scaffold for student learning and growth. Project-based learning helped to foster this, since students had to rely on each other to solve problems while simultaneously adapting and refining intercultural communication skills, in line with findings from Peraza and Furumura (2022). This is significant because it elucidates the ways in which discomfort can act as a catalyst for student development, pushing students to adapt, reflect, and build resilience. The VE created productive discomfort (McCauley & Yost, 2021; Russo-Netzer & Cohen, 2023) wherein the challenges experienced fostered deeper learning.

My third research question explored how the design of the programme supported student belonging, and how students exercised agency in creating their own connections. Interviews and photo elicitation submissions provided glimpses into the ways in which the programme offered structure for students to build relationships in the VE but also enabled them to create their own ways of building community. Students built on connections made in the VE when meeting face-to-face and even maintained their connections after the programme ended. This is significant because it illustrates how students used familiar digital tools and social practices to co-create a sense of connection, demonstrating that “belonging” in global learning environments is not only facilitated by design but also actively shaped by student agency and creativity. This shifts attention away from assimilationist frameworks that critics such as Yao (2015) and Mittelmeier (2025) argue can be detrimental to marginalised or international students and shifts toward frameworks that see belonging as co-created by both institutions and students. In this case, finding common ground—whether through musical tastes, shared life experiences, or other connections—helped students feel safe as they navigated a new landscape marked by linguistic,

intercultural, and teamwork-related challenges. This suggests that seemingly small points of connection can play an outsized role in fostering a sense of belonging, enabling students to engage more confidently and collaboratively in unfamiliar environments, as long as they have the time and space to find that common ground.

My final research question explored how participation in Hybrid Exchange Programmes differentially benefits U.S. and Brazilian students while reflecting the distinct priorities and socio-economic pressures faced by these students. Survey and interview data revealed how Brazilian students anticipated (and ultimately developed) greater gains in professional development and language skills, in contrast with U.S. students, who primarily showed gains in terms of personal and intercultural development, including maturity, self-confidence, and expanded worldview. This is significant because it reveals how structural inequalities shape students' goals and the kinds of benefits they are able to extract from global learning experiences (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; Martinez et al., 2023). Such programmes can mirror and reinforce existing disparities, making it essential that educators and institutions critically examine how equity is operationalised within their programmes (Stein, 2020; De Wit & Jones, 2022).

### **Future Research**

While HEPs draw upon many well-established fields of literature, more research is needed on this particular facet of international education programming, particularly outside of European partnerships. This gap is especially evident in critical, data-driven analyses of how the hybrid format shapes learning over time, what they might add pedagogically, and how they might reshape power relations between students and institutional partners. This dissertation addresses these gaps and in so doing, contributes to this scholarship by centring student perspectives, exploring equity, offering a diverse geographic perspective, and employing a

comparative lens. By examining how students experience HEPs across multiple dimensions and by reflecting on the pedagogical, technological, and power dynamics at play in these programmes, this research offers insights that can guide the design of future programmes.

Programmes that blend VE and mobility are a novel form of programming. Even the name, Hybrid Exchange Programme was created to reflect the specific design of my study, where some students are mobile and others are not, but all engage in meaningful exchange online and in person in Brazil. This choice of wording privileges the “exchange” element, which is common to all students’ experience, rather than focusing on “mobility” which is not a universal aspect of the programme experience. Because such programmes are still emerging in the literature, I highlight four areas for future research focusing on 1) geographic positionality of partnerships; 2) the sequencing of activities; 3) the impact of motivation on outcomes, and 4) the role of institutional policy in supporting such programmes.

One area for future research is the potential for Hybrid Exchange Programmes that are based upon South-South partnerships, with all partners coming from Global South institutions. While this study focuses on a Hybrid Exchange Programme that involved students from the Global North and Global South, future research should investigate the ways in which South-South HEPs could foreground epistemologies and partnership dynamics that are not centred in North-South programmes.

A second topic for future research is on the sequence of activities as a factor in programme design and student outcomes. Further study could be done to explore how the sequence of VE and face-to-face exchange influences students’ overall experiences and learning on HEPs, with particular attention being paid to the possibilities for students to reflect on their experiences throughout differently sequenced programmes. Within this case study, the face-to-

face exchange occurred at the end, but the outcomes might have been different if it had occurred prior to, or in the middle of, the VE.

A third topic for future research could examine the motives that influence programme design and development. The availability of funding for Hybrid Exchange Programmes such as the European Union's Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), provides new areas for future research. Such research could explore how programmes that utilise structured incentives to incorporate VE may have different results than those that develop organically without financial incentives. Potential areas of focus could include a comparative study of funded and unfunded programmes in terms of programme sustainability and student and faculty satisfaction with programme design.

Finally, future researchers should explore how institutional factors impact the scalability of Hybrid Exchange Programmes. It should investigate the ways in which institutional policy does or does not support the conditions necessary to sustainably scale out Hybrid Exchange Programmes and should explore how this can occur in an equitable manner. Factors such as institutional leadership, funding, student support, faculty development, and access to programme participation could be explored as predictors or inhibitors for growing and scaling HEPs.

### **Significance for Programme Designers**

This research showcases the ways in which programmes can be designed to deepen student learning and engagement and encourage student exchanges that foster reflexivity and even friendship. Findings show how combining VE and in-person exchange offers a wide array of opportunities for students to learn, reflect, and ultimately transform. The programme demonstrated the ways in which a single programme can serve a variety of student interests, motivations, linguistic abilities, and more. The differences that emerged between the Brazilian

and U.S. students draw attention to the ways in which structural inequalities shaped both goals and benefits, but that in being attentive to student needs, faculty and other programme designers can develop programmes that are responsive to a broader array of students.

### **Significance for International Higher Education**

This dissertation contributes to International Higher Education Research through a rich description of Hybrid Exchange Programmes as a distinct model of internationalisation that intentionally combines VE with in-person exchange. Findings explore how the structure of the programme contributes to student learning. It shows that transformative learning was not restricted to students who travelled abroad, nor was it tied to an extended-duration mobility experience. Rather, it was tied to structured opportunities for students to step outside of their comfort zones, both virtually and in person. It positions HEPs as programmes that can expand participation while maintaining meaningful opportunities for deep learning.

This study highlights how programme design is central to student learning. Sequencing virtual and in-person exchange enabled students to move through cycles of challenge, reflection, and growth. Students' ability to build communities of belonging helped them navigate that discomfort and create meaningful personal connections. It adds to theoretical debates on experiential and transformative learning and shows how programme design can be scaffolded to meet student needs.

The study advances research on Brazilian-U.S. exchanges and reveals differences between the motivations and outcomes for participants by country. It highlights a programme that aims for greater access for a wider array of students, while providing a vision of what internationalisation can look like moving forward. It also cautions that Global-South/Global-North partnerships must be designed around reciprocity if they are to provide exchanges that are

meaningful to all participants. Ultimately, this study challenges assumptions about mobility, programme design, and equity, and offers a vision of internationalisation that is flexible, inclusive, and transformative.

### **Closing Reflections**

The introduction of this dissertation explored the different nuances of the English word “exchange” and the Portuguese word *intercâmbio*, noting that both are based on the Latin “cambium” or “change,” while English uses the prefix “ex” (“out of”) whereas Portuguese uses “inter” (“between, among”) (Oxford University Press, 2025a; Oxford University Press, 2025b; Oxford University Press, 2025c). These etymologies complement each other and create a fuller picture in unison. This layered definition is also a fruitful way to understand the Hybrid Exchange Programme experience. Like a palimpsest, a student’s experience of growth is written in layers: first through the VE, later through the in-person exchange, and the finally through meaning-making after the programme ends. As with the words “exchange” and *intercâmbio*, where older meanings remain beneath newer ones, student learning in HEPs exists in layers that are not erased but continually rewritten. This palimpsestic quality is a core component that enables students to learn and grow as participants on the programme. It is within the layers between languages, between cultures, and between people, that the possibility of genuine transformation emerges.



**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A: Pre-Virtual Exchange Survey Questions and Source**

Prior to the start of the virtual exchange, students received a survey with 19 questions adapted from Anderson and Lawton, 2015, Dwyer, 2004, Mohajeri Norris and Dwyer, 2005 and the researcher. They were asked to respond to the questions using an adapted version of a Likert scale originally developed by Anderson and Lawton (2015). Students could then choose from: Not at all; A little; Moderately; A lot; Immensely. Some of the questions were modified slightly to make more sense in the context. The original wording is contained in brackets. After each question, the option to add additional text so participants can more fully explain their answer is available but not required.

<b>Question</b>	<b>Source</b>
How much do you expect to grow in personal maturity through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what degree do you anticipate getting to know people who are different through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
How much do you expect your self-confidence to increase through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you believe your employment prospects will be enhanced by participating in this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you believe that this experience will help you gain essential career skills?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you think this experience will expand your world view?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you anticipate that this experience will enhance your understanding of global affairs and events?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you anticipate gaining knowledge in your chosen field of study through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what degree do you anticipate that this experience will enable you to interact more effectively with people from other countries?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you expect to become more independent through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015

To what extent do you expect to improve your ability to understand different cultures through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
How well do you expect to understand your own cultural values and biases because of this experience?	Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005
How much do you expect your tolerance for ambiguity to increase as a result of this study abroad experience?	Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005
How likely is it that you will learn something new about yourself during this experience?	Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005
To what extent do you expect to establish relationships abroad that could become professional contacts?	Dwyer, 2004
To what extent do you think that working with faculty from overseas will contribute to your intercultural gains?	Researcher
To what extent do you expect to gain an international perspective in your chosen field as a result of this experience?	Researcher
How much do you expect your cross-cultural communication skills to improve through this experience?	Researcher
To what extent do you expect your foreign language skills to be enhanced through this experience?	Researcher
How much do you expect your tolerance for ambiguity to increase as a result of this study abroad experience	Researcher
How likely is it that you will learn something new about yourself during this experience?	Researcher

Four open-ended questions were also asked:

- What are some goals you have for participating in this programme? (1–3 sentences)  
(Source: researcher)
- What do you perceive as some of the challenges of participating (1–3 sentences) (Source: researcher)
- What are you most excited about? (1–3 sentences) (Source: researcher)

- How do you think this experience will enhance your future employability or suitability for graduate school? (Source: researcher)

**Appendix B: Post-Virtual Exchange Survey Questions and Source**

At the end of the virtual exchange, students were asked to repeat the survey they had taken prior to the VE experience. Again, this contained 19 questions adapted from Anderson and Lawton, 2015, Dwyer, 2004, Mohajeri Norris and Dwyer, 2005 and the researcher. The students were asked to respond to the questions using an adapted version of a Likert scale originally developed by Anderson and Lawton (2015) and the instructions were modified slightly to ask students to reflect on their VE experience. The instructions read: *To what extent has participating in the VE contributed to changes in the measures below?* Students could then choose from: *Not at all; A little; Moderately; A lot; Immensely*. This Likert scale was based on the one developed by Anderson and Lawton (2015) with some small modifications for context. Some of the questions were modified slightly to make more sense in the context. The original wording for the questions is contained in brackets. After each question, the option to add additional text so participants can more fully explain their answer is available but not required.

Question	Source
To what extent do you feel that this experience has influenced your personal maturity?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you gotten to know people who are different through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent has this experience impacted your self-confidence?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you believe that this experience has impacted your employment prospects?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent has this experience impacted the development of essential career skills?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you think this experience has expanded your world view?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you think that this experience has enhanced your understanding of global affairs and events?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you gained knowledge in your chosen field of study through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015

To what degree has this experience enabled you to interact more effectively with people from other countries?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you become more independent through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you improved your ability to understand different cultures through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you been able to understand your own cultural values and biases because of this experience?	Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005
To what extent has your tolerance for ambiguity increased as a result of this experience?	Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005
To what extent have you learned something new about yourself during this experience?	Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005
To what extent have you established relationships abroad that could become professional contacts?	Dwyer, 2004
To what extent do you think that working with faculty from overseas has contributed to your intercultural gains?	Researcher
To what extent have you gained an international perspective in your chosen field as a result of this experience?	Researcher
To what extent have your cross-cultural communication skills improved through this experience?	Researcher
To what extent have your foreign language skills been enhanced through this experience?	Researcher
To what extent have you become more independent through this experience?	Researcher
To what extent have you improved your ability to understand different cultures through this experience?	Researcher

Seven open-ended questions were also asked:

- What are some goals you have for participating in this programme? (1–3 sentences)  
(Source: researcher)
- What do you perceive as some of the challenges of participating (1–3 sentences) (Source: researcher)

- What are you most excited about? (1–3 sentences) (Source: researcher)
- How do you think this experience may enhance your future employability or suitability for graduate school? (1–3 sentences) (Source: researcher)
- Can you describe an activity you participated in as part of the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil that challenged you to develop new knowledge, skills, or perspectives? What was the activity, and how did it push you beyond your previous capabilities? Reflecting on your experience, what factors do you think influenced your approach to this challenging activity? (Source: researcher)
- Describe whether participating in the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil has influenced your approach to challenges and new opportunities in your daily life. Have you made changes as a result of your experiences during the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil? Have you taken on any new activities as a result of participating? If so, please describe. (Source: researcher)
- Reflecting on the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil, can you describe a situation that you found confusing or challenging to your usual ways of thinking? Did you change how you normally act as a result? (Source: researcher)

**Appendix C: Post-On-Site Survey Questions and Source**

At the end of the in-person meeting in Brazil, students were asked to repeat the survey they had taken prior to the VE experience. Again, this contained 19 questions adapted from Anderson and Lawton, 2015, Dwyer, 2004, Mohajeri Norris and Dwyer, 2005 and the researcher. The students were asked to respond to the questions using an adapted version of a Likert scale originally developed by Anderson and Lawton (2015) and the instructions were modified slightly to ask students to reflect on their entire experience. The instructions read: *To what extent has participating in the on-site programme contributed to changes in the measures below?* Students could then choose from: *Not at all; A little; Moderately; A lot; Immensely*. This Likert scale was based on the one developed by Anderson and Lawton (2015) with some modifications for context. Some of the questions were modified slightly to make more sense in the context. The original wording for the questions is contained in brackets. After each question, the option to add additional text so participants can more fully explain their answer is available but not required.

Question	Source
To what extent do you feel that this experience has influenced your personal maturity?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you gotten to know people who are different through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent has this experience impacted your self-confidence?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you believe that this experience has impacted your employment prospects?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent has this experience impacted the development of essential career skills?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you think this experience has expanded your world view?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent do you think that this experience has enhanced your understanding of global affairs and events?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you gained knowledge in your chosen field of study through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015

To what degree has this experience enabled you to interact more effectively with people from other countries?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you become more independent through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you improved your ability to understand different cultures through this experience?	Anderson, P. H., & Lawton, L., 2015
To what extent have you been able to understand your own cultural values and biases because of this experience?	Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005
To what extent has your tolerance for ambiguity increased as a result of this experience?	Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005
To what extent have you learned something new about yourself during this experience?	Mohajeri Norris & Dwyer, 2005
To what extent have you established relationships abroad that could become professional contacts?	Dwyer, 2004
To what extent do you think that working with faculty from overseas has contributed to your intercultural gains?	Researcher
To what extent have you gained an international perspective in your chosen field as a result of this experience?	Researcher
To what extent have your cross-cultural communication skills improved through this experience?	Researcher
To what extent have your foreign language skills been enhanced through this experience?	Researcher
To what extent have you become more independent through this experience?	Researcher
To what extent have you improved your ability to understand different cultures through this experience?	Researcher

Seven open-ended questions were also asked:

- What were some goals you had for participating in this programme and to what extent do you feel that you met these? (Source: researcher)
- What were some of the challenges of participating in this programme? (Source: researcher)

- What were aspects of the programme that you found most exciting? (Source: researcher)
- Do you think this experience enhanced your future employability or suitability for graduate school? If so, how? (Source: researcher)
- Can you describe an activity you participated in as part of the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil that challenged you to develop new knowledge, skills, or perspectives? What was the activity, and how did it push you beyond your previous capabilities? Reflecting on your experience, what factors do you think influenced your approach to this challenging activity? (Source: researcher)
- Describe whether participating in the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil has influenced your approach to challenges and new opportunities in your daily life. Have you made changes as a result of your experiences during the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil? Have you taken on any new activities as a result of participating? If so, please describe. (Source: researcher)
- Reflecting on the virtual exchange or in-person experience in Brazil, can you describe a situation that you found confusing or challenging to your usual ways of thinking? Did you change how you normally act as a result? (Source: researcher)

### Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The questions below form the basis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with students on Zoom. There was some variation including occasional follow-up questions or skipping questions that had already been addressed by the interviewee.

- Can you tell me a little about yourself and what interested you about this programme?
- What have your prior travel experiences been like?
- Did you have any specific goals at the outset of this programme?
- What were your expectations about the virtual exchange component?
- What was it like meeting the other students in person after the virtual exchange?
- Are you still in touch with anyone from the programme?
- What was it like working on the business project with your team online?
- Do you think the virtual teamwork prepared you for your time together?
- What was the experience in Brazil like for you?
- What opportunities did you find most valuable?
- How did your perceptions of the programme change from the start of the virtual exchange to the end of the programme in Brazil?
- Did you find a picture you wanted to share from your time in Brazil or during the virtual exchange?
- Based on your experience, is there anything you would recommend doing differently in future iterations of this programme? Is there anything you feel that we should definitely continue to do?
- How do you think this experience will be impactful in your future?

## Appendix E: English Consent Form

For Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 Surveys, Photo Elicitation, and Interviews

### Consent Document

**Principal Investigator Name and Title: Nicole Lamers, PhD, Director of Business Study Abroad**

**Department and Institution: Office of Undergraduate Affairs, Gies College of Business, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign**

**Contact Information: Nicole Lamers: lamers@illinois.edu; Grace Cleary: gcleary@illinois.edu**

### BACKGROUND

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you want to volunteer to take part in this study. The purpose of the study is to understand the educational impact of programs that combine virtual exchange and study abroad. The researchers expect that this will improve programme design for future students.

### STUDY PROCEDURE

The study will use several methods to try to better understand how students experience this form of global education programming. These include the IES survey, an additional survey, the opportunity to share two photos and reflect on them (“Photovoice”), and an interview with a smaller subset of students. More details are outlined below.

- **IES survey:** This will be administered at three junctures: before the virtual exchange starts, after the virtual exchange ends, and after the on-site experience in Brazil. It will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. This will be administered to all students as part of the course, but students can consent to release this data to the research team if they desire to do so). Therefore, no additional time commitment is requested since this survey will be required as part of the course.
- **Additional survey:** This will be administered at three junctures: before the virtual exchange starts, after the virtual exchange ends, and after the on-site experience in Brazil. Each survey contains variations on the same 21 questions. Students use a 5-point Likert scale to reply with the option to add additional text to clarify responses if they wish to do so. We anticipate that it will take 10 minutes for students to complete the survey at each stage (30 minutes total for all three stages).
- **Photovoice:** At two junctures in the HGE, students will be prompted to take photos and describe them, utilizing a photovoice methodology. This will occur during the VE and during the on-site component in Brazil. The prompt is: Share a photo that shows an experience that was effective, exceptional, or personally meaningful. They will be asked to include 5–7 sentences describing the photo. The photos and descriptions will be coded and analyzed for themes. We

anticipate that it will take students 15 minutes per submission (30 minutes total for the two stages).

- Interview: We anticipate interviewing a smaller number of students presently enrolled in the programme and also students who participated in this programme in 2023. We will ask them about their photovoice submissions (if applicable) and will also ask questions to understand what their goals for participating in the programme were and the extent to which they felt that they met these. We aim to interview 10 participants over Zoom. We anticipate these interviews will take between 30–60 minutes. Prior to the interview, students will receive an email with a link to this consent document and a question that allows them to indicate their continued consent to include the interview as part of the data for the study. The text will read “I consent have this interview included in the research study “Student Perceptions of Hybrid Global Experiences.” I understand that the researcher will remove personally identifiable information upon receipt. \_Yes \_No”

### **RISKS**

There is minimal risk that if participants were identified with their responses, that there would be harm

to their reputation which is why we insist on de-identifying data prior to analysis. Loss of confidentiality, is therefore a potential risk.

### **BENEFITS**

There are no direct benefits to participants. However, participants will have the opportunity to reflect upon their learning experiences which may help them to better understand their own learning styles and clarify their future academic and professional goals. They may also feel a sense of fulfillment through their contributions to the advancement of knowledge related to Hybrid Global Experiences and the knowledge that their contributions may benefit future participants in such programs.

### **HOW WILL THE RESEARCHERS PROTECT MY INFORMATION?**

If you choose to participate in the study, the researcher will be able to access your responses and will immediately remove your name and other identifiers and assign a code to de-identify your responses. Participant data is protected by an institutional secure file system that is FERPA compliant and requires multi-factor authentication by the researcher. The researcher is the only individual with access to the password and the technology required to complete the multi-factor authentication.

### **WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO THE INFORMATION COLLECTED DURING THIS RESEARCH STUDY?**

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy.

There are reasons why information about you may be used or seen by other people beyond the research team during or after this study. Examples include:

- **University officials, government officials, study funders, auditors, and the Institutional Review Board may need access to the study information to make sure the study is done in a safe and appropriate manner.**
- **Collaborating researchers at other institutions who are involved with this study**

### **HOW MIGHT THE INFORMATION COLLECTED IN THIS STUDY BE SHARED IN THE FUTURE?**

We will keep the information we collect about you during this research study for study recordkeeping. De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community, with journals in which study results are published, and with databases and data repositories used for research. We will remove or code any personal information that could directly identify you before the study data are shared. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee the anonymity of your personal data.

### **Person to Contact**

If you have questions, complaints, or concerns about this study, you can contact:

- Grace Cleary [gcleary@illinois.edu](mailto:gcleary@illinois.edu) +1 217-244-7245 (may be reached M-F from 8:30-4:30 CST)
- Nicole Lamers +1 217 244-0753 [lamers@illinois.edu](mailto:lamers@illinois.edu) (may be reached M-F from 8:30-4:30 CST)
- Daniel Amgarten +55 11 5198-7980 (may be reached M-F from 8:30-4:30 Brazilian Time)

**Institutional Review Board:** If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 217-333-2670 or e-mail OPRS at [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu). If you would like to complete a brief survey to provide OPRS feedback about your experiences as a research participant, please follow the link here or through a link on the OPRS website: <https://oprs.research.illinois.edu/>. You will have the option to provide feedback or concerns anonymously or you may provide your name and contact information for follow-up purposes.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Research studies include only people who choose to take part. You can tell us that you don't want to be in this study. You can start the study and then choose to stop the study later. This will not affect your relationship with the investigator.

### **CONSENT**

I understand that the information I share will be de-identified so that my name is not connected with it. I consent to allow the information I share to be shared in publications, conferences, and other scholarly venues.

By signing this consent form, I confirm I have read the information in this consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I will be given a signed copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

## Appendix F: Portuguese Consent Form

For Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3 Surveys, Photovoice, and Interviews

### Termo de Consentimento

Nome e título do pesquisador principal: Nicole Lamers, PhD, Diretora de Negócios em Estudos no Exterior

Departamento e instituição: Office of Undergraduate Affairs, Gies College of Business, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Informações de contato: Nicole Lamers: lamers@illinois.edu; Grace Cleary: gcleary@illinois.edu

#### VISÃO GERAL

Você está sendo convidado a participar de um estudo de pesquisa. Antes de decidir, é importante que entenda por que a pesquisa está sendo feita e o que envolve. Reserve tempo para ler as informações a seguir com atenção. Pergunte-nos se há algo que não está claro ou caso deseje mais informações. Reserve um tempo para decidir se quer se voluntariar para participar deste estudo. O objetivo do estudo é compreender o impacto educacional de programas que combinam intercâmbio virtual e estudo no exterior. Os pesquisadores esperam que isso melhore o design do programa para os futuros alunos.

#### PROCEDIMENTO DO ESTUDO

O estudo usará vários métodos para tentar entender melhor como os alunos vivenciam essa forma de programação de educação global. Os métodos incluem a pesquisa da IES, uma pesquisa adicional, a oportunidade de compartilhar duas fotos e refletir sobre elas (“Fotovoz”) e uma entrevista com um subconjunto menor de alunos. Mais detalhes estão descritos abaixo.

- Pesquisa IES: será aplicada em três momentos: antes do início do intercâmbio virtual, após o término do intercâmbio virtual e após a experiência presencial no Brasil. Levará aproximadamente 20 minutos para ser concluída. Será administrado a todos os alunos como parte do curso, mas os alunos só consentem em liberar esses dados para a equipe de pesquisa se desejarem). Nenhum compromisso de tempo adicional é solicitado, uma vez que esta pesquisa será exigida como parte do curso.

- Pesquisa adicional: será aplicada em três momentos: antes do início do intercâmbio virtual, após o término do intercâmbio virtual e após a experiência presencial no Brasil. Cada questionário contém variações das mesmas 21 perguntas. Os alunos usam uma escala Likert de 5 pontos para responder, com a opção de adicionar texto para esclarecer as respostas, se desejarem. Prevemos que são necessários 10 minutos para que os alunos preencham a pesquisa em cada etapa (30 minutos no total das três etapas).

- Fotovoz: Em dois momentos do HGE, os alunos serão solicitados a tirar fotos e descrevê-las, utilizando uma metodologia de fotovoz. Isso ocorrerá durante o VE e durante o componente presencial no Brasil. O quesito é: compartilhe uma foto que mostre uma experiência que foi eficaz, excepcional ou pessoalmente significativa. Eles serão solicitados a incluir 5–7 frases descrevendo a foto. As fotos e descrições são codificadas e analisadas por temas. A

previsão é de que os alunos levem 15 minutos por submissão (total de 30 minutos para as duas etapas).

- Entrevista: Prevemos entrevistar um número menor de alunos atualmente matriculados no programa e também alunos que participaram deste programa em 2023. Perguntaremos a eles sobre suas submissões de fotovoz (se aplicável) e também faremos perguntas para entender quais eram seus objetivos para participar do programa e até que ponto sentiram que os cumpriram. Nosso objetivo é entrevistar 10 participantes por Zoom. Prevemos que essas entrevistas levem de 30 a 60 minutos. Antes da entrevista, os alunos receberão um e-mail com um link para este documento de consentimento e uma pergunta que lhes permite indicar seu consentimento contínuo para incluir a entrevista como parte dos dados para o estudo. O texto terá a seguinte redação: “Concordo que esta entrevista seja incluída no estudo de pesquisa ‘Percepções de Alunos sobre Experiências Globais Híbridas.’ Entendo que o pesquisador removerá informações pessoalmente identificáveis após o recebimento. Sim Não”

### RISCOS

Há um risco mínimo de que, se os participantes fossem identificados com suas respostas, haja danos

à sua reputação, razão pela qual insistimos em desidentificar os dados antes da análise. A perda de confidencialidade é, portanto, um risco potencial.

### BENEFÍCIOS

Não há benefícios diretos aos participantes. No entanto, participantes têm a oportunidade de refletir sobre suas experiências, o que pode ajudá-los a compreender melhor os seus estilos de aprendizagem e a clarificar seus futuros objetivos acadêmicos e profissionais. Também podem sentir-se realizados por meio de suas contribuições ao avanço do conhecimento relacionado às Experiências Globais Híbridas e sabendo que suas contribuições podem beneficiar futuros participantes de tais programas.

### COMO OS PESQUISADORES PROTEGERÃO MINHAS INFORMAÇÕES?

Se você optar por participar do estudo, ao acessar suas respostas o pesquisador removerá imediatamente seu nome e outros identificadores e atribuirá um código para desidentificar suas respostas. Os dados dos participantes são protegidos por um sistema de arquivos seguro institucional, compatível com a FERPA e requer autenticação multifator pelo pesquisador. O pesquisador é o único indivíduo com acesso à senha e à tecnologia necessária para completar a autenticação multifator.

### QUEM TERÁ ACESSO ÀS INFORMAÇÕES COLETADAS DURANTE ESTA PESQUISA?

Empenhar-nos-emos para limitar o uso e a divulgação de informações pessoais, incluindo registros do estudo, às pessoas que precisam revisar essas informações. Não podemos prometer sigilo total.

Há razões pelas quais as informações sobre você podem ser usadas ou vistas por outras pessoas além da equipe de pesquisa durante ou após este estudo. Exemplos incluem:

- *Funcionários da universidade, funcionários do governo, financiadores do estudo, auditores e o Comitê de Revisão Institucional podem precisar de acesso às informações do estudo para garantir que o estudo seja feito de maneira segura e apropriada.*
- *Pesquisadores colaboradores de outras instituições envolvidas com este estudo*

#### COMO AS INFORMAÇÕES COLETADAS NESTE ESTUDO PODERÃO SER COMPARTILHADAS NO FUTURO?

Manteremos as informações que coletamos sobre você durante este estudo de pesquisa para manutenção de registros do estudo. Os dados não identificados deste estudo podem ser compartilhados com a comunidade de pesquisa, com periódicos nos quais os resultados dos estudos são publicados e com bancos de dados e repositórios de dados usados para pesquisa. Removeremos ou codificaremos qualquer informação pessoal que possa identificá-lo diretamente antes que os dados do estudo sejam compartilhados. Apesar destas medidas, não podemos garantir o anonimato dos seus dados pessoais.

#### PESSOA A CONTACTAR

Se tiver dúvidas, reclamações ou preocupações sobre este estudo, entre em contato com:

- Grace Cleary [gcleary@illinois.edu](mailto:gcleary@illinois.edu) +1 217-244-7245 (de segunda a sexta de 8h30-4h30 CST)
- Nicole Lamers +1 217 244-0753 [lamers@illinois.edu](mailto:lamers@illinois.edu) (de segunda a sexta de 8h30-4h30 CST)
- Daniel Amgarten +55 11 5198-7980 (de segunda a sexta de 8h30-4h30 Horário de Brasília)

Comitê de Revisão Institucional: Se tiver alguma dúvida sobre seus direitos como sujeito de pesquisa, incluindo preocupações, reclamações ou para oferecer contribuições, pode ligar para o Escritório de Proteção a Sujeitos de Pesquisa (OPRS): 217-333-2670, ou enviar um e-mail para OPRS: [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu). Se gostaria de completar uma breve pesquisa para fornecer feedback a OPRS sobre suas experiências como participante de pesquisa, siga este link aqui ou o link no site: <https://oprs.research.illinois.edu/>. Você terá a opção de fornecer comentários ou preocupações anonimamente ou poderá fornecer seu nome e informações de contato para fins de acompanhamento.

#### PARTICIPAÇÃO VOLUNTÁRIA

Os estudos de pesquisa incluem apenas pessoas que optam por participar. Você pode nos dizer que não quer estar neste estudo. Você pode começar o estudo e, em seguida, optar por parar o estudo mais tarde. Isso não afetará seu relacionamento com o investigador.

#### CONSENTIMENTO

Entendo que as informações que compartilho serão desidentificadas para que meu nome não esteja conectado a elas. Concordo em permitir que as informações que compartilho sejam compartilhadas em publicações, conferências e outros locais acadêmicos.

Ao assinar este termo de consentimento, confirmo que li as informações deste termo de consentimento e tive a oportunidade de fazer perguntas. Receberei uma cópia assinada deste termo de consentimento. Concordo voluntariamente em participar deste estudo.

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Nome legível do participante

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Data

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Nome legível da pessoa que obtém o consentimento

**Appendix G: Consent Form for On-Site Observations**

INFORMATION FORM FOR THE PARTECIPATION TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT  
for ADULT Subjects

Title of the study:

**Student Perceptions of Hybrid Global Experiences: An Exploration into Global Education Programmes that Link Virtual Exchange and Study Abroad**

**PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS:**

**Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore,  
Italy**

**Gies College of Business, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA**

**RESEARCH GROUP**

**Not applicable**

**Dear Sir/Madam,**

We inform you that we are conducting a study entitled: Student Perceptions of Hybrid Global Experiences: An Exploration into Global Education Programmes that Link Virtual Exchange and Study Abroad,

Names and affiliations of research group:

Amanda Murphy L-LIN/12 Lingua inglese e traduzione. Dipartimento di Scienze linguistiche e Letterature straniere, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, amanda.murphy@unicatt.it

And Grace Cleary, PhD student at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore CHEI, and Assistant Director of Business Study Abroad at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA  
gcleary@Illinois.edu

and

Dra. Rosalind Raby, Affiliate Faculty, Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation (CHEI), Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano rabyrl@aol.com

And

Dra. Adriana Perez-Encinas, Affiliate Faculty, Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation (CHEI), Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano adriana.perez.encinas@uam.es

For this reason, we propose you to participate to the study that will be conducted under the responsibility of Prof. Amanda Murphy L-LIN/12 Lingua inglese e traduzione. Dipartimento di Scienze linguistiche e Letterature straniere, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, amanda.murphy@unicatt.it

Before you decide whether to accept or refuse, we invite you to read carefully this document; whenever you wish to have further information and clarifications, you can refer to Prof. Grace Cleary (whose contact information are specified at the end of the document) who will dedicate all the time necessary to clarify any doubt, provided that you can address professionals involved in the conduct of the study at any time.

**Are you obliged to participate to the study?**

Your participation is completely voluntary. Moreover, if you change your mind and want to withdraw from the evaluation procedure at any time, you are at liberty to do so.

**Premises and aim of the study**

*-Aim:* The main aim of the study is to document interactions between participants and describe the learning environment during significant events and routine moments.

*-Study design:*

The study will employ an observation grid and guide to record and consider observable events that describe the learning environment on the programme during significant events and routine moments to enhance the researcher's understanding of the educational environment.

*-Estimated duration of the Study:* May 14–25, 2024.

*-Number of participating subjects:* Approximately 40.

**What will happen if you decide to participate in the study?**

The *procedure* involves:

**The procedure involves the researcher making observations about the learning environment in Brazil that will help to describe the learning experience and the ways in which students engage in different facets of programming and interact with each other.**

**What are the possible benefits linked to the participation to the study?**

**There are no direct benefits to participation in the study.**

**What are the possible risks/side effects linked to the participation to the study?**

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

**Further important information**

We inform you that the study will be conducted in accordance to the “Standards of Good Clinical Practice” in compliance to the ethical principles established at a national level by the Code of Ethics for the psychological research, approved in 2015 by the Italian Psychological Association (AIP, Associazione Italiana di Psicologia) and updated according to the GDPR norms in July 2022, and inspired by the “Declaration of Helsinki” at the international level and successive revisions (latest version in 2013) applied to research in the psychological field.

**Participation to the study**

Your participation is completely free and voluntary.

If you consent to participate, you will be asked to sign the *Form of Informed Consent to the participation to the study and to data processing*, attached to the present document, before you start performing the procedure intended by the study.

Signing the attached module is aimed at ensuring that you have received complete information and that you have freely expressed your will to participate; such signature does not imply any commitment to continue the study from your behalf, it does not establish any contractual obligation, and it does not represent a waiver of your rights.

In case you decide to withdraw from the study, after having initially accepted, you can terminate your participation at any time by communicating it to the Study Director without any justification. The choice of non-participation, or withdrawal following initial acceptance, does not have any negative consequences and does not imply any disadvantage in your relationship with personnel assisting you. Whenever new data or findings that could influence your participation to the study are known, you will be immediately informed; moreover, the Study Director could withdraw you from the study if he/she considers that such choice responds to your best interest.

Financially, the participation to the study does not determine any kind of cost or any additional charge from your behalf.

We want to clarify that you are not asked to participate to this study to have clinical assistance, or to obtain personal benefits of diagnostic nature.

### **PERSONAL DATA PROCESSING**

The researcher will ask you some personal data, such as gender, date of birth and others. This information is important for a correct conduct of the study.

Personal data collected during the conduct of the present study will be treated in compliance of the legislation provided by the Regulation (EU) 2016/679 respect to the «Protection of natural persons about the processing of personal data», entered into force since 25<sup>th</sup> May 2018, and by Legislative Decree 06.30.2003 n.196 – The personal information protection code, as far as not abrogated by the entry in force of the aforementioned European Regulation.

Pursuant to this legislation, the Owner of the processing of your personal data will be the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan.

#### *Nature of data and processing modality*

Your personal information collected during the study are confidential and will be treated in compliance with the aforementioned legislation in force.

Data that have been given by you will be rendered unidentifiable, namely the collected material will be anonymized and will be unconnectable to the identity of the participant to the Study. This material will be analyzed and processed for the purpose of the scientific research only by personnel in charge of the conduct of the Study.

Data, processed also with electronical instruments, could be spread in a strictly anonymous form in meetings, conferences, and scientific publications; however, your name or any other detail that could lead to your identification, will not be disclosed since data will be presented in aggregated form exclusively, namely with a modality that will not make identifiable subjects participating to the study.

Data processing does not involve an automated decisional process, profiling included. Adequate security measures will be adopted in order to guarantee protection, security, integrity and accessibility of personal data.

Personal data will be preserved only for the time required for the achievement of the purposes for which they have been collected or for any other legitimate purpose connected to it, anyway within a minimum period of 5 years (pursuant to Art.17 of the Deontological Code of Italian Psychologists).

Personal data that will no longer be necessary, or a legal basis will not persist for their retention, will be irreversibly anonymized or safely destroyed.

Informed consent forms will be stored in a secure, cloud-based storage service that meets requirements for confidential and restricted data and requires multi-factor authentication to access data. The data storage protection system is FIPS 140-2 certified and each file is encrypted using AES 256-bit encryption.

*Exercise of the rights*

The GDPR – EU Reg. 2016/679 requires and strengthens the personal data protection and processing in terms of the principles of fairness, lawfulness, transparency, protection of privacy and rights of the interested party with regard to his/her data.

You can exercise your rights from the Art. 7 of the Legislative Decree 193/2003 and the Art. 15–18 and Art. 20-21 of the GDPR – EU Reg. 2016/679 (access to your personal data, ask for their integration, update, rectification, cancellation, demand to their limitation, request for the portability, oppose to their processing) turning directly to the Manager of processing, alternatively through personnel in charge.

In case you withdraw from the study, further data about you will no longer be collected, notwithstanding the use of data that have been eventually already collected in order to determine the results of the study, without altering them.

For any possible complaints or reports about the data processing modality, it is advisable to turn to the Manager of the data processing. However, it is possible to address one's complaints or reports to the Authority responsible for the data protection, using the appropriate contact details: Italian Data Protection Authority – piazza di Montecitorio n.121 – 00186 ROME (fax: 06 696773785; tel.: 06 696771; email: garante@gpdp.it; PEC: protocollo@pec.gpdp.it).

The protocol of the study to which you are offered to participate, has been approved – along with the present document – by the Ethical Committee of the Psychology Department (CERPS, Commissione Etica del Dipartimento di Psicologia) of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

the undersigned:

---

Surname and First Name of the participating adult subject in locked letters.

born in, on the:

---

*Place and date of birth of the participating adult subject.*

residing at \_\_\_\_\_, in street

\_\_\_\_\_

- on his/her behalf
- exercising the legal representation of

\_\_\_\_\_

born in \_\_\_\_\_ on the

\_\_\_\_\_ residing at \_\_\_\_\_

in street \_\_\_\_\_

I declare the following:

- in accordance with the Legislative Decree n.196/2003 and with the GDPR – EU Reg. 2016/679, having received appropriate information about the processing of personal data and in relation to what previously mentioned about the processing of such information, I express free consent to the collection, the processing and the communication of personal data for all the purposes and in all the modalities mentioned by the present document, by checking the following box.

GIVES CONSENT  DOES NOT GIVE CONSENT

- I give my free consent for any audiovisual recordings made during the project by marking the box below. I state that these recordings will be made freely and I prohibit their use in any context that might damage myself or the individual I represent.

GIVES CONSENT  DOES NOT GIVE CONSENT

- Regarding the aforementioned audiovisual recordings, I express my free consent to their use and publication in any form by ticking the box indicated below, including in educational and/or scientific publications, etc.

GIVES CONSENT  DOES NOT GIVE CONSENT

I also declare the following:

1. I have read and understood the information form of which this module is an integral part;
2. I have had the possibility to ask questions by email and ask clarifications to Prof. Grace Cleary from whom I have received satisfying replies;
3. I have been shown in the information form the nature, the purpose and the duration of the study, the procedures that will be followed, the treatment required for the participants and the kind of collaboration that will be requested to them;
4. I have understood that the participation to the study is free and voluntary and that I can decide to withdraw / withdraw who I legally represent from the study at any time without being subjected to negative consequences and without my/his/her rights and my/his/her relations with involved personnel being compromised;

**In light of the above, I accept the offer to participate to the study described in the present document by signing.**

Place and date: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

This part is reserved to the operator who presented the document

I the undersigned  
*Surname and Name in locked letters*

I declare:

- a. to have explained to the person aforementioned in the information form the nature and purpose of the study, including the procedures that will be adopted and the kind of collaboration that will be requested;
- b. not to have tried to influence or force in any manner the aforementioned person to induce him/her to manifest his/her consent to the participation to the study;
- c. to provide to the aforementioned person a signed and dated copy of the present document.

Place and date: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix H: Summary of Course Activities and In-Person Activities****January 17**

- Welcome, Intros, Syllabus & Overview

**January 19**

- Guest Lecture

**January 24**

- Guest Lecture

**January 26**

- Lecture and Discussion: What is Culture?: Social/Cultural Identity

**January 31**

- Lecture and Discussion: What is Culture?: Definitions and Features of Culture

**February 2**

- Lecture And Discussion: *The Culture Map* (Intro & Chapter 1)

**February 7**

- Lecture And Discussion: *The Culture Map*

**February 9**

- Guest Lecture: Presentation on Brazilian Culture

**February 14**

- Lecture and Discussion: *The Culture Map*

**February 16**

- Guest Lecture

**February 21**

- Lecture and Discussion: *The Culture Map*

**February 23**

- Lecture and Discussion: *The Culture Map*

**February 28**

- Brazil Overview: Doing Business in Brazil History, Culture and Traditions

**March 2**

- Work Time: Icebreaker and Practical Activity for Teams Integration

**March 6**

- Guest Lecture: Cultural Diversity in Virtual Teams: Effects on International Project Success

**March 8**

- Case Introduction and Project Work Time: Introduction of business case by a Brazilian company and session time for teams to organize first steps

**March 20**

- Guest Lecture: Lecture on Social Entrepreneurship

**March 22**

- Work Time and Teams Check-In with Mentors: Session time for teams to work on business case and check-in with mentors to ask for feedback and improvements

**March 27**

- Business Canvas Model, Project Canvas Model, Sprinting

**April 3**

- Lecture Or Activity Based on *Culture Map* Chapters

**April 5**

- Work Time: teams to work on business case

**April 10**

- Lecture On Project Management Principles

**April 12**

- Work Time: teams to work on business case

**April 17**

- Workshop: Storytelling and How to Build Your Final Presentation

**April 19**

- Work Time: teams to work on business case

**April 24**

- Pre-Boarding Session + Q&A

**April 26**

- Work Time: teams to work on business case + final check-in with academic mentors

**May 1**

- Study Abroad Safety Training

**May 14**

Orientation Session about the program and Safety & Culture

**In-Person Activities in São Paulo**

- May 14: Orientation
- May 14: Walking Tour
- May 14 Traditional dinner
- May 15: Company visit
- May 15: Ibirapuera Park
- May 15: *Capoeira* workshop
- May 16: Company visit
- May 16: Group project work
- May 17: Group work and project debrief
- May 17: University visit
- May 17: Drum workshop
- May 17: Cultural Tour of Batman's Alley

**In-Person Activities in Rio de Janeiro**

- May 18: Travel to Rio de Janeiro
- May 19: Rio city tour
- May 19: University visit
- May 20 Company visit
- May 21: Visit to Favela Arts Organization
- May 21: Company visit
- May 22: Company visit
- May 22: Visit Christ the Redeemer
- May 22 Farewell Dinner

### **Declaration of Authorship**

I declare that I am the author of this dissertation and acknowledge the use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, in line with the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation guidelines, which encourage responsible engagement with AI. I utilised AI tools in limited ways to support efficiency and to help clarify my ideas. OpenAI was utilised for translating between English, Italian, and Portuguese. It was also used for assistance in outlining and structuring drafts, brainstorming, and in limited cases, to refine word choice and phrasing. This form of support is consistent with accepted academic practices of seeking editorial feedback and does not compromise the integrity of the research. All interpretations, conclusions, and contributions are my own.

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